Target Your Worst Offenders

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- www.lawofficer.com
- Deborah Osborne

Research shows that 6% of criminals commit approximately 60% of the crime occurring in your jurisdiction. It only makes sense to find out who these 6% are, but it isn't as easy as it sounds. How can you find the 6%?

I asked members of the International Association of Crime Analysts for ideas on targeting the worst offenders. Crime intelligence analysts are needed to analyze data and combine intelligence information to help you identify your 6%.

Why target them? If you target them strategically by disrupting their activities, you prevent future crime. If you can identify who they are, you can arrest them when they inevitably break the law again. You'll be prepared to help them be prosecuted more successfully, and hopefully incarcerated longer, if you have a clear picture of who they are and what they've done. Your analysts can help you by creating target profiles of these individuals.

One obvious method to find out who your problem criminals are in your area is to analyze arrest data. Who has been arrested most frequently? What crimes should you look at? A prolific burglar may be arrested for fraud and forgery more often than arrested for burglary. A clever criminal may not be arrested at all. Estimates show that experienced and high level drug dealers are arrested only once for every 1,000 drug transactions they make. Be careful not to confuse volume of arrests with the quality of the criminal.

Weighted values are used in a number of agencies that have programs to target their worst offenders. Values are assigned to a variety of activities, including some or all of the following: number of arrests, specific charges (for example, firearm charges weighted more than shoplifting charges), registered sex offenders, felony arrests, misdemeanor arrests, current probationer, current parolee, warrants, contact with police, appearing as a suspect or witness on field interview reports, violent crime convictions, weapons offense, use of an alias in a past arrest, history of absconding or failure to appear, ICE detainer on file, and involvement in crime or repeated police contact since a juvenile. The weighted values vary by jurisdiction—you have to decide what scoring makes sense to your jurisdiction. Trial and error may be the case before you decide what actually makes sense. Work with your analysts to help you figure that out.

Many agencies have faced the challenge of having lists of career criminals and prolific offenders that are too long to be useful. Targeting hundreds of individuals effectively is impossible. Finding the top people to target usually involves some more subjective measures. Allowing investigators/officers to rank offenders by notoriety is added by some jurisdictions. Street level intelligence is a factor in some methods. Some agencies use confidential informant information as part of their methodology. Some agencies decide who's bad and run with that, without objectively measured criteria. It's important to integrate both crime analysis (information on incidents) and intelligence analysis (information on people) when deciding who to target.

Other challenges include making sure you target those who aren't incarcerated by keeping informed of who's in jail and who's being released. Communication is crucial. It's also important to purge your lists of deceased individuals, those incarcerated for long periods of time and those who have dropped from the radar for long enough to consider them inactive.

Red Flags

Behavioral and lifestyle indicators can be weighted in determining who your worst offenders are. Failure to graduate from high school, history of school discipline problems, history of running away as a juvenile, lack of or weak social ties, underemployment or unemployment, alcoholism or drug addiction, history of mental illness, arrested family members, history of committing crime against a family member, and membership in a gang or other deviant group may be considered along with other criteria to determine risk to the community.

The number of jurisdictions affected by the criminal is another variable that's probably seldom considered in a single local-level police department, but certainly makes sense. Considering the danger to the community is an important variable that's difficult to make consistently and accurately measurable. Just because it's difficult doesn't mean we shouldn't strive to improve it.

An innovative method to find violent offenders is to analyze ballistic evidence and find links in the evidence. More cases are related than you might suspect. By finding what individuals were at the scene or otherwise related to the shootings cases, this evidence may display patterns that lead to offenders you should target. Also be aware that your next murder victim may be someone who has a huge rap sheet. Offender notification sessions can warn known gang members and their associates who are on probation or parole of their likelihood of being the next victim. In theory, this strategy may also help influence them enough that they avoid committing crimes.

Targeting chronic nuisance crime/disorder offenders (drunk, mentally ill, trespassers, etc.) is also a strategy to consider. These lower level criminals use up a lot of police resources. It is strategic to identify the problem individuals and find ways to reduce their drain on the system. This may require working with social service agencies and other community partners. Addressing quality of life issues can have an impact on more serious crime. Small jurisdictions will prioritize different sorts of criminals than large urban areas. Many of their career criminals won't be violent criminals; nevertheless they're a real problem.

When you have a lot of drug offender-initiated property crime, it can be useful to focus on individuals with many charges in the past year, noncompliance with the court and those known to officers.

Social network analysis of organized criminals combined with intelligence information can be used for targeting the worst offenders. Theoretically, some of the worst offenders may be uncovered this way—the more powerful people in a criminal network are unlikely to be the people arrested the most.

The ability of a group to influence criminals and corrupt can be weighted, along with impact on the community, risk level for violence, types of commodities involved, geographic impact (local, regional, national), weapons and resources.

Stay Current

Successful targeting of your worst offenders requires accurate and up-to-date information, actionable information, enforcement teams that can move across jurisdictions, partnerships with district attorneys/prosecutors, updates on results (feedback increases incentive) and excellent information sharing between all involved. It requires crime analysis and intelligence analysis.

Prolific career criminal Patrick Burris became a serial killer when he murdered five people between June 27 and July 2 in South Carolina. He had served eight years in jail for breaking and entering, larcenies and other charges. Although he had violated parole through repeated curfew violations and driving without a license after being released from prison in late April of this year, and had been arrested for thirty crimes in North Carolina, he was released from Lincoln County jail June 12 after posting a $2,000 bond. He'd been convicted of crimes in four other states. Burris was shot and killed in a shoot-out by Gaston County police who were investigating a burglary July 5.

No police commander, police officer or police agency wants this to happen on their watch. We all need to become more strategic about identifying our worst criminals and strategically targeting them if they're not in jail. We need to communicate better about them throughout the criminal justice system. We need to find ways to keep those who deserve to be in jail off our streets.

Who are your 6%?

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- International Association of Crime Analysts
- Jerry Ratcliffe on Intelligence-Led Policing
- Catching Career Criminals
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- **Deborah Osborne**

Deborah Osborne was a crime analyst in the Buffalo Police Department from 1997-2007, and has taught online college courses in crime and intelligence analysis. See her blog at Analysts' Corner .