

## REGIONALIZATION OF INVESTIGATIONS:

### Solving Smart Crime with Regional Intelligence

#### *Introduction*

If the history of criminology teaches us nothing else, it teaches us that the criminal element will find innovative ways to use new technology for illegal purposes.

Bonnie and Clyde, Dillinger and other bandits of the early twentieth century used the automobile in ways that law enforcement had barely imagined. American popular culture is filled with images of the "bad guys" making a run for the next county, the next state, or the Rio Grande depending on the era of the transgression and the tenacity of the lawman they were attempting to flee. Prior to the automobile, criminals saw trains as attractive targets for robbery, with the added advantage of using the train to facilitate their escape. Jurisdiction was an issue in these cases, but at least law enforcement had the advantage of knowing precisely where a crime took place. Police agencies could join investigative forces to solve serious crimes, hunt for fugitives or search for killers who preyed on victims in more than one jurisdiction.

The nature of crime, however, is constantly changing. As the rate of technological change increases, so too does the diversity of criminal conduct. With an accelerating pace of technological advancement in today's world, the pulse and stream of criminal activities can be overwhelming. Even those with limited computer skills have been able to use technology to commit highly sophisticated and widely devastating crimes ranging from identity theft to being

used to support criminal enterprises engaged in a variety of violent and property crimes. In the emerging landscape, criminals do not need to leave the comfort of their homes (delete “in order” in all circumstances) to commit crimes in their neighborhoods. (insert comma) across town or even on a national or international scale. The jurisdictional issues expand exponentially as the location of the criminal, the location of the victim (delete comma) and the location of the technology all become pertinent. Whether the issue is the accessing child porn on the Internet, identity theft, embezzlement or some other technology-based crime, local agencies may well find themselves interacting with regional, national and international agencies, all of whom have legitimate claims of investigative jurisdiction. In such a chaotic environment, the criminal has the upper hand. Left untended, the situation will only worsen. What is needed is a new approach to fighting crime without traditional boundaries.

- ❖ One approach to sorting through the jurisdictional and logistical morass that technology has helped create is to regionalize many aspects of police services. Canada and the United Kingdom have regionalized entire police forces to provide a high degree of professionalism amongst peace officers and deliver more effective and efficient service to their communities.<sup>1</sup> Due to the fragmentation of police organizations, regionalization remains elusive on a wide scale in the United States. One area where American policing has made great strides towards the regionalized model of UK policing, however, is the combining of investigative resources to combat crime trends that cross jurisdictional boundaries as quickly as the click of a computer’s mouse.

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<sup>1</sup> Edward J. Tully, “Regionalization or Consolidation of Law Enforcement Services in the United States,” *NEIA Associates*, (January 2002), <http://www.neiassociates.org/regionalization.htm>

How might the regionalization on investigative services impact the future service models of American policing? What are the advantages and disadvantages of such an approach? In this article, we will assess those issues and consider the obstacles to implementing regionalization as well as suggested areas of future study. Before moving on, however, it is instructive to see where we've been.

### *What Is Regionalization?*

In the United States, law enforcement agencies are organized in a loose-knit structure of 18,000 local, county, state and federal agencies throughout the country.<sup>2</sup> This fragmented structure has inherent strengths—such as the ability to provide "personalized services" tailored to a specific city, county or state's needs. This same structure, however, may also lead to fragmented responses when crimes cross jurisdictions and multiple agencies work on the crime in "silos" rather than in a coordinated fashion.

Regionalization in the broadest sense involves sharing information across agencies within a specific region. The region might be as small as two municipalities, or as large as an entire country. The "amber alerts" to locate missing children by notifying motorists to encourage their help is one example of regionalization and coordination of effort. Regionalization can also include combining resources from several different agencies in order to meet a specific need. When this occurs, there are issues that arise regarding chain of command, field responsibility and communications responsibility. A common example of regionalization is the formation of a task

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<sup>2</sup> Peter G. Sinden, *Issues Associated with Local/Regional Policing in Chautauqua County*, Fredonia, NY: SUNY College at Fredonia, New York: Page 2.

force comprising individuals from different agencies in order to solve a specific crime, such as apprehending a serial killer. Working from this example, imagine the successes one might see if other areas of crime received the same level of coordinated effort.

Regionalization can encompass many different levels of cooperation (one word, no dash). As already noted, it might be as simple as sharing information across agencies. Alternatively, teams might be brought together on a task force level for specific projects. In an era of shrinking budgets and increasingly sophisticated criminal, though, progressive police administrators may wish to consider actually regionalizing these services on a more permanent. A more streamlined structure would take advantage of the work of investigators from municipalities in a given region combined under one command and control structure to maximize their effectiveness. This level of regionalization moves well beyond merely sharing information and goes beyond merely bringing resources together on a limited basis such as task forces produce.

#### *Advantages of Regionalization*

Through regionalization, investigators can gain access to financial, technological and human resources that would otherwise be unavailable due to the smaller budgets of local agencies. This, in turn, makes it possible for investigative services to be more efficient in deterring, apprehending and prosecuting criminals who increasingly resort to elaborate international, interstate and technological methods for committing crimes.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "Meeting Law Enforcement's Responsibilities, Solving the Serious Issues of Today," *Major Cities Chiefs Association, Critical Issues Study Group* (October 2001): Page 8.

Regionalization efforts in Los Angeles, San Diego, Las Vegas and Jacksonville have been successful in limiting costs and maximizing services in the communities they serve.<sup>4</sup> In both Los Angeles and San Diego counties in California, the Sheriff's Departments work under contract to a number of communities in their respective jurisdictions to provide all or part of that community's policing. Las Vegas NV and Jacksonville FL have both successfully merged their police and sheriff's agencies into larger (and more effective) organizations. Although many existing agencies may not wish to engage in large-scale regionalization, the examples clearly show consolidated models of service delivery do work in a variety of combinations. Even limiting regionalization to investigative services would allow more cohesive efforts among law enforcement agencies, enabling them to meet greater and more specialized demands. Rather than facing limitation from jurisdictional boundaries, police agencies would have access to greater resources and would achieve more effective investigations through regional collaboration.

Regionalization is successful because it allows the implementation of high-cost technological resources that are otherwise unavailable to agencies under the presently localized organizational structure, and because it promotes a higher level of professionalism among law enforcement personnel. This, in turn, gives them greater opportunities for career growth and access to better training.

The advantage of regionalizing investigative services can be seen in a recent successful investigation of child pornography in Southern California. A combination of independent

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<sup>4</sup> Edward J. Tully, "Regionalization or Consolidation of Law Enforcement Services in the United States," *NEIA Associates*, (January 2002), <http://www.neiassociates.org/regionalization.htm>

investigations by agencies as diverse as the FBI and the California Department of Justice's Bureau of Investigations (CBI) and participation by local agencies such as the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department and the Brea Police Department led to charges being filed against 28 defendants, nine of whom agreed to plead guilty.<sup>5</sup> This case involved the creation and maintenance of Web sites devoted to child pornography, downloading images from the Web, trading images via e-mail, ordering videotapes via the Internet and printed images of child pornography. This case mixed traditional media—printed images—with new technologies such as the Web and e-mail. In this example, the local agencies provided logistical and intelligence support to the regional and national agencies, and the national agencies pursued the indictments. Certainly, the problem is not limited to particular jurisdictions. The Brea CA Police Department works with the FBI on a weekly basis to investigate child pornography and similar Internet-based crimes. Without a cooperative framework for investigating such incidents, perpetrators might continue to elude the grasp of the justice system and victims would not be found and taken to safety. Obviously, that is an unacceptable future for the police or their constituents.

### *Regionalization Implementation Issues*

In July 2005, a panel comprised of law enforcement officials and other professionals convened to address the trends and areas of concern most relevant to the task of regionalizing investigative services. The panel also identified several potential events that would impact regionalization

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<sup>5</sup> Thom Mrozek, "28 Face Federal Charges in Child Pornography Case," Washington, DC: Department of Justice, July 13, 2005. Retrieved from: <<<http://www.usdoj.gov/usao/cac/pr2005/101.html>>>.

endeavors.<sup>6</sup> ~~The panel utilized the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) to analyze data and trends with input from the members' unique perspectives.~~<sup>7</sup> Delete and put in footnotes

First and foremost among the panel's concerns is that of the gap between the resources needed for regionalization and the resources available. While regionalization brings about economic savings over the long-term as synergies are realized and duplication of resources eliminated, the initial stages can require up-front costs. These costs include logistical tools such as common communication devices—phones, PDAs, even computer systems—and support personnel.

Finding the resources to fund these resources, and then determining who owns or controls those resources, was cited by the panel as being a significant obstacle to regionalization.

The panel also cited differing philosophies among agencies as another significant area to be addressed in any regionalization program. The cultural differences among agencies could easily lead to a breakdown in communications or in leadership that would effectively inhibit the regionalization effort. Any regionalization plan should begin with a thorough understanding of the cultures and philosophies of the various agencies, and care should be taken to address differences in organizational culture as part of the regionalization process. It is estimated that as many as 75 percent of all mergers fail in business, and often that failure is ascribed to cultural

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<sup>6</sup> Panel participants included an assistant district attorney, a city personnel manager, a city finance director, a police officer and president of a police union, a school board member, a retired police captain and city council member, and a graduate of the POST Command College.

<sup>7</sup> The NGT is a strategic method for decision making concerned with allowing a variety of input from group members while simultaneously minimizing interpersonal group conflicts. NGT achieves its purpose by regulating inputs and decision selections, and by applying a structure of four steps to the decision making process, beginning with the silent generation of ideas in writing, progressing to round-robin feedback and discussion, and concluding with individual voting. See Gepson, Martinko and Belina (1981) for additional information on NGT.

differences that remain unresolved.<sup>8</sup> To the extent that regionalization includes many of the same issues as a business merger, those responsible for the regionalization would do well to find ways to heal cultural differences.

Another area of concern raised by the expert panel is that of parochialism, here defined as a self-centered focus on an agency's immediate concerns with a narrowly defined perspective and little regard for events occurring beyond the agency's jurisdiction. Parochialism is a significant obstacle to regionalization and one that should not be underestimated. (this paragraph was moved here to smooth flow) This is particularly true when neighboring communities—among the most likely candidates for regionalization—have diverse investigative needs. For example, Anaheim and neighboring smaller cities, in Southern California, might well be considered candidates for regionalization. However, their investigative needs differ significantly. Residential burglary is often a significant concern for smaller cities; while this is also the case in some regions of Anaheim, the latter also faces more gang-related crime and takes acute pains to deal with special events and tourism since Anaheim is home to the Angels baseball team, the Arrowhead Pond (an indoor arena), the Anaheim Convention Center (one of the busiest in the nation) and Disneyland. Different philosophies regarding prioritization of investigations could be difficult to overcome, although there is little doubt that the smaller cities and Anaheim would benefit from regionalization in the long-run because they are contiguous.

Interestingly, the panel considered this an issue that is paramount to today's agencies (are you saying parochialism is an issue that is paramount? That is what has been stated; if you mean

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<sup>8</sup> David Overd, "Seize the Day," *Acquisitions Monthly*, April 2003, pp. 24-31.

getting beyond it, or if you are referring to the regionalization concept being paramount, you'll need to re-word), but which is also likely to increase in importance as communities face continued growth.

The panel also noted that any regionalization effort will need to involve unions from the earliest stages ~~in order~~ (delete "in order" from your writing in all instances...) to avoid implementation issues later in the process. While union members might ultimately benefit from access to better technology and enhanced resources, unions might be threatened or perceive that regionalization efforts might result in layoffs due to redundancy. By working with union representatives from the beginning of the regionalization process, regionalization team members can help to identify and resolve union concerns before they become major obstacles to the process.

While the panel noted the above significant concerns, they also noted several key benefits that reinforce the importance of pursuing regionalization efforts among investigative service agencies.

The panel noted, for example, that recruiting and retention is on a downward trend for many police agencies. In addition to young people being drawn to other careers, baby boomers are retiring in large numbers. This creates an organizational memory "gap" as well as an overall shortage in personnel. Bringing together several agencies makes it possible to combat this trend and can enhance the ability of investigators to "do more with less." At the same time, the public may have unrealistic expectations of what investigative agencies can accomplish—due in part to the images of police forensics solving any crime on television—within the confines of limited technology and resources. Making more expensive resources available to greater numbers of

investigators through regionalization may help investigators meet the expectations of the citizens they serve.

When the panel addressed the issue of technology, they found it to be one of the most significant aspects of law enforcement, and one that is double-edged. On the one hand, technology presents a grave threat to law enforcement. As technology advances at a rate unparalleled in history, so the opportunities for criminals increase, as well. Identity theft, while technically possible throughout history, became far easier with the high prevalence of home computers and the Internet.

At the same time, technology offers great potential for law enforcement in combating crime. This potential exists not only for solving technology-based crimes, but also for solving "traditional" crimes, including crimes against persons. Surveillance cameras at ATMs, for example, can provide an excellent tool not only for solving crimes that involve ATMs, but also for assisting in investigations of crimes that occur in the vicinity. "Just as technology increases the opportunities for criminals, it also increases the ability of law enforcement to apprehend those same criminals," said Doug Dickerson, retired police captain from Brea, California.

### *The Regionalization Plan*

Any regionalization effort needs to begin with a regionalization plan. This plan should include a clearly stated mission for the regionalization project as well as a clearly defined scope for the project. The goals and objectives of the regionalization effort should also be clearly stated. Thus if the regionalization plan is to create an environment where task forces can come together on an *ad hoc* basis, that should be clearly stated. If the regionalization plan intends instead to create a

phased regionalization of investigative services for five municipalities, for example, that also needs to be clearly stated.

The regionalization plan also needs to define the roles and responsibilities for the various agencies involved, including budgetary and financial responsibilities. Regionalization plans can be highly political due to the parochial and philosophical issues discussed above, and identifying the responsibilities of all involved can help mitigate long-term political issues. A budget and financial projections as well as an implementation timeline should also be included.

It is also critical that the plan include the metrics for measuring the success of the program and methods for integrating feedback into the program, as needed. Defining the metrics must be done with great care so that the "right" factors are measured. It may not be enough, for example, to measure whether crimes against persons decline in a given area, or whether there are increased arrests for technology-based crimes. Instead, the regionalization plan must take into account the specific goals of the specific regionalization effort and use metrics that will measure whether those goals are achieved. For some regionalization programs, this might be an increase in the number of arrests; for others, in the number of convictions. The latter may only be measured for those regions where the prosecutions actually occur, which is one reason why metrics must be carefully selected. For example, a successful regionalization effort might result in prosecutions that occur at the federal level; such prosecutions need to filter down to the region in order to affect the metrics. As with any initiative in law enforcement, regionalization is a long-term process that evolves and changes with changes in the external environment.

The most direct approach to implement the plan is to meet with the local chief's association and discuss with them the idea for a regional investigative services unit. Through informal talks with

the individual chiefs and subsequent meetings as a group the goal would be for them to begin to see value in the concept. From those discussions a committee could be formed to investigate the details. The committee would seek input from the internal and external stakeholders; city staff, police managers, supervisors, detectives, officers, police labor associations, civilian employees, citizens, and business leaders. They would research the unit's structure, focus, and operational function. At the point that the police chiefs believe the concept would improve their organizations and it was feasible, they would spearhead the efforts for implementation with city management, city council, and the citizens in their respective jurisdictions.

The advantage of this strategy would be a fairly rapid pace of study and acceptance of change if initiated by this group. This group possesses the influence, power, and authority to make it happen. There is the potential, though, that some executive might feel threatened by this concept due to a fear of pooling resources at the expense of their autonomy or power. They would certainly have to consider how regionalization would impact their entire organization and community. One example of where regionalization has improved service and reduced costs for the participating members is the North County SWAT Team in Orange County California, comprised of five municipal police agencies. ~~The team operates with about 80 members.~~ Each agency enjoys the benefits of a well trained and fully functional SWAT team at a reduced cost and more expertise than the individual agencies could provide.

#### *Areas for Further Research*

Further research is needed to address the best practices in implementing regionalized law enforcement structures. Case studies, such as one that profiles the child pornography case described above, can offer "lessons learned" that provide both positive and negative information

about inter-agency co-operation leading to regionalization. Additional best practices can be culled from agencies—such as Brea and Yorba Linda, California—where regionalization of law enforcement services has already occurred.

In addition to "best practices," regionalization efforts should be studied to determine the economic impact on agencies and the communities they serve. While there is anecdotal evidence suggesting that regionalization results in economies of scale and synergy from specialization, additional research is needed to develop formal models that demonstrate the economic effects of regionalization.

Successful regionalization programs—successful based on internal and external criteria—should also be studied to determine how culturally diverse organizations have been integrated successfully. Similarly, these regionalization programs should also be studied to determine how political and philosophical conflicts have been resolved.

### *Conclusion*

The current atmosphere in decentralized law enforcement agencies (who are they? Are you saying police departments in general, or is there a "decentralized" agency to which you are referring? You could generalize this sentence, or further refine to whom you are referring) is one of limited financial resources and an inability to meet the needs brought about by increasingly sophisticated methods of crime. Analysts are in general agreement that there are many ways in which the decentralized system falls short of the expectations of the community and law enforcement professionals alike (cite ref re who the analysts are and what they said in your footnote). Constantly struggling against economic hardship and jurisdictional strictures, these agencies cannot prosper in their current incarnations.

The timing is ripe for the implementation of regionalized investigative efforts. Strengthen the visuals and examples in the body text to convince them of this conclusion. Maximizing the use of economic and human resources, regionalization will allow law enforcement to meet the needs of the public and will enable investigators to achieve better rates of prosecution and case closure. Although agencies may initially resist the types of widespread change inherent to the process of regionalization, the ultimate outcome will be advantageous for all involved and will strengthen law enforcement's capabilities and power.

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