

**WHAT WOULD BE THE IMPACT OF REGIONALIZED CRIMINAL  
INVESTIGATIONS ON MID-SIZED MUNICIPAL LAW ENFORCEMENT  
AGENCIES IN CALIFORNIA BY 2013?**

**A Futures Article presented to the  
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**This Command College Independent Study Project is a Futures study of a particular emerging issue in law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future but rather to project a number of possible scenarios for strategic planning consideration.**

**Defining the future differs from analyzing the past because the future has not yet happened. In this project, useful alternatives have been formulated systematically so that the planner can respond to a range of possible future environments.**

**Managing the future means influencing the future-creating it, constraining it, adapting to it. A futures study points the way.**

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**California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training**

## **Regionalizing Criminal Investigations: Can It Be Done?**

Imagine an innovative regional criminal investigations team run by highly trained professionals that produces significant prosecutorial outcomes, has collaborative cooperation among all members and may cost significantly less to operate. This may be the future of law enforcement criminal investigation operations.

A new, futuristic model for this idea is a Regional Criminal Investigations Team that involves a number of smaller police agencies whom closely border one another. Municipalities in California generally support a traditional model; maintaining their own police force rather than relying on a county sheriff for public safety. The proposed model will blend some of the benefits of maintaining local control, while also providing enhanced quality investigations for prosecution. This will allow local law enforcement to be at the forefront of how we deliver services at reduced costs while retaining or enhancing the effectiveness of our investigations. As you will see, this leap of faith is shorter than one might think.

### **No Budget Foresight**

It was only a short time ago that cities and counties across America were basking in the bright lights of prosperity. Rising general fund revenues were allowing municipalities to increase law enforcement staffing and purchase big-ticket equipment at historic rates. Although most economists have said they did not expect the high-times to continue without end, few expected the bottom to fall out as rapidly as it has. For example, the Federal Congressional Budget Office, in a report posted January 12, 2008, said "The risk of recession is elevated" and noted that some economists "believe that the probability of a recession has now risen to 50 percent or greater."<sup>1</sup> Fast-forwarding to an article in the Los Angeles Times dated January 31, 2009, they reported the

Gross Domestic Product for the United States fell more than 3.8 percent in the fourth quarter of 2008.”<sup>2</sup> Interest-only residential mortgages and an over-inflated stock market had given politicians and citizens the feeling of affluence.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, the years of casino-like financial folly have ended badly for millions of mortgage holders and stock investors. Former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan told the United States Congress in October 2008, the current global financial crisis is a "once-in-a-century credit tsunami that policymakers did not anticipate.”<sup>4</sup>

After months of back-door politicking, the California State Legislature reached a budget compromise for the 2009/10 fiscal year. On January 7, 2009, almost 2 months before the budget was approved, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger stated in a public address, “Our crisis gets worse every day if we don’t go and solve this problem. In a matter of weeks, California, which is the eighth largest economy in the world, will run out of cash and start issuing IOUs to the people that it does business with. Also, it will delay refunds to our hardworking taxpayers.”<sup>5</sup> Bill Watkins, a research scholar at the University of California at Santa Barbara recently said: “As society moves further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it appears the American economy is heading toward or already is in a recession.”<sup>6</sup>

According to a report from the League of California Cities, cities on average spend about sixty percent of their budgets on firefighter and police officer salaries.<sup>7</sup> Mandates for ongoing professional training, essential fleet-services, computerized records management and computer-aided-dispatch are costly as well. Regardless of who is to blame for this current budget crisis, a plan must be formulated now to prevent this obstacle from affecting communities in future years. It is now time for many policing agencies to consider a new concept in task force framework:

regionalizing criminal investigations within a group of neighboring small and mid-sized municipal law enforcement agencies.

Tax revenues are not going to be able to cover the extraordinary expenses of municipal government, and certainly not its public safety costs. Eventually, government will have to pay people less or with a different pension and benefits structure. According to Timothy L. Dabney, Chief of Police for the City of Lompoc, “Local governments are going to have to identify new revenue sources to tap or increase fees significantly to fund public safety in the future. Our citizens voted down a recent attempt to raise the City sales tax rate by a half cent to help fund public safety. We have very limited options available now.” The budget problems facing California and the rest of the United States should make it imperative we plan more wisely for the future. Sharing resources such as equipment, manpower, and expertise is just one model of cost savings that agencies can adopt without losing staff. Rethinking how we conduct criminal investigations is another. In fact, the advantages of an integrated model of investigative services can increase effectiveness while also limiting costs.

### **Going Full-Circle**

Task forces exist throughout California in the form of narcotics, gang, and auto theft units. On a larger scale, the concept of regionalizing law enforcement services has been played out in communities such as the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department in Nevada, the Dade County / Miami Police Department in Florida and the City of Charlotte / Mecklenburg North Carolina Police Departments. These and other agencies combined full sized police and sheriff departments together to form one centralized force.

On a smaller scale, regionalizing police support services has been researched previously. In 1997, J. Kent Hawthorne of the Placer County CA Sheriff's Department wrote a California

Command College article supporting the concept of consolidation of support services in a smaller rural county.<sup>8</sup> Hawthorne's premise was to consolidate certain services such as records management, communications (dispatch), evidence collection, crime scene processing, and training. At the time of the article, communities were enjoying growth and a degree of prosperity while local law enforcement leaders shared similar visions of cooperation and collaboration. Times have changed, and although consolidation was a good concept then, it is now more urgent to consider due to the cost savings and increase in effectiveness.

### **Why Regionalize Criminal Investigations?**

Law enforcement agencies that are geographically close to one another tend to duplicate police services, creating a degree of redundancy in their product delivery. Most communities retain their own criminal investigators and provide funding for their training. County Sheriff Departments may also provide investigative support to local agencies; such as crime scene investigators or detective support in the event of a major crime.

The California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) supports agencies with financial assistance for training of officers. In November 2008, though, the POST Commission adopted new rules pertaining to reimbursements to agencies for training in response to the State's financial crisis. Beginning in 2009, individual departments will have to fund a larger portion of officer training, including lodging and meals, which will affect the types and frequency of training offered to police officers.<sup>9</sup> By regionalizing criminal investigations into an ongoing task force model, agencies will save training costs by sharing detectives who have (or will) developed special expertise in select fields. When asked about the concept of a regionalized criminal investigation unit, Captain Paul Bonaventure of the Folsom Police Department said the model works in other areas of the profession and deserves consideration, especially in light of the

budget problems State-wide. He added that he felt departments could save some money, but more importantly, improve the quality of investigations by using the best and brightest investigators to solve crime.<sup>10</sup>

### **Current Trends**

In April 2008, a group of law enforcement professionals in Santa Barbara County gathered to discuss the concept of regionalizing criminal investigations.<sup>11</sup> Several factors were cited that supported the benefits to regionalizing criminal investigators into a central unit within participating jurisdictions. They agreed that shrinking budgets, retention and recruitment, training, and the increasing frequency of high technology crime would all support creation of a standing criminal investigation task force.

This same group of professionals concluded that resourcefulness will be the future trend in the profession; that finding and retaining qualified officers due to drug experimentation and other issues of moral turpitude will limit the employee pool; and that retaining officers will be a challenge for smaller and lower paying agencies as personnel seek the best pay and benefits. All of these trends would be positively affected by regionalizing investigative services, further substantiating the validity of the concept.

In view of the fact that high tech crimes (i.e. computer theft, child pornography, and illegal Internet commerce) are more prevalent now, specialized training and costly equipment has become more essential to this business. The same group discussed events that could either promote or derail an attempt to form a task-force criminal investigation unit. Their discussion included responding to a major crime event that involved multiple agency cooperation, the securing of a grant to consolidate investigative services, or legislative action that would mandate the current “duplication of services” model to change. Other significant issues noted were:

- Current events that have made recent headlines in California include the bankruptcy of the City of Vallejo<sup>12</sup>. It forced their Police Department to adjust its organizational structure to focus on the basic essentials of service delivery to the community.
- A major crime event such as a school-site shooting or the Beltway sniper attacks in 2002<sup>13</sup>, may force multiple agencies to work toward one central purpose: safe resolution and solving of the crime.
- Federal Government grants can be used to regionalize criminal investigation services to multiple agencies. Homeland Security grants, Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) grants, and grants directed toward investigative practices of sexual assault cases are regularly available.
- Equipment grants that provide funds for special equipment used to investigate computer crimes are available through the U.S. Department of Justice. Internet crime such as the sexual exploitation of children can be fought more effectively through Federal grants and cooperation with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. In a task force setting, it is conceivable that a majority of staff positions could be funded in support of a consortium of agencies forming a task force of criminal investigators.
- Legislative changes sometimes drive law enforcement to adjust its mode of operations. For example, “Jessica’s Law”<sup>14</sup> was created to protect children from sexual predators and has promoted law enforcement agencies to better monitor their local predators.

Although these events are rarely preventable, they do promote inter-agency cooperation, a point central to the idea of regionalization of criminal investigations. As demonstrated with narcotics and gang task forces nation-wide, inter-agency cooperation forged through task force formation could be a preemptive move to improve the law enforcement response to future critical incidents.

### **A Structural Model**

The Wyoming Division of Criminal Investigation<sup>15</sup> employs special agents and partners them with Regional Enforcement Teams comprised of members from various participating agencies in the State. These regional teams investigate a variety of criminal acts ranging from theft to murder. With access to a regional crime lab and staff, forensic investigations are conducted as part of the overall investigation. Salaries and benefits of team members are funded by the agencies that provide the personnel under a joint powers agreement.

Using a similar framework, adjacent small to medium agencies in California would provide a specified number of investigators to participate in the task force. Like the Wyoming model, each local agency would agree on a number of personnel to assign. Investigators would be members of their individual agencies, but the task force would assume responsibility for managing the types of crime considered for investigation and the overall scope of responsibility to its joint partners.

Because of the potential volume of cases from participating agencies that require some amount of follow-up investigation, the regional team would be assigned priority cases based on pre-defined criteria. At the discretion of each participating agency, each may also choose to maintain in-house investigators for the lower level crime that doesn't meet the agreed-upon threshold.

In the law enforcement community, to sell a plan about change to a group of communities, specific and measurable points must be identified to the various leaders and stakeholders. Below are several points suggested by the Santa Barbara County law enforcement professionals that met to discuss this topic:

- Improvement in consistency and uniformity of investigations for prosecution

- Improved coordination of investigative service to each community
- Consistency in training for specialized crime types
- More strategic use of money to share high-cost purchases among participating agencies
- Career enhancement opportunities
- Improved forensic collection and analysis of computer technology, DNA, etc.
- Opportunity for innovation

Along with points to support this concept, there are points to consider that might derail or at least need consideration before this plan would be implemented.

- Some degree of loss of local control of investigations
- Difficult transition period may hinder progress
- Potential for initial unforeseen costs in the implementation phase
- Suspicion among leaders of who is getting the most attention toward crime
- Disparity of pay between agencies may cause competition amongst team members
- There will undoubtedly be more issues for and against this task force concept when discussed with leaders. Other important stakeholders important for this change include political leaders, labor unions, and citizen groups

#### Command Structure and Operational Costs

Command structure of the task force will be an important element of the implementation phase. A competitive process for selection of team members and leaders should be established. Cost sharing for certain items in the start-up phase will require commitment from the agencies involved. Anticipated initial costs include sufficient and centralized office space, office support

staff, office equipment such as computers and printers, operational supplies, and vehicles for staff members. This is also the time in the organizational process to begin searching for grants and other financial support for the unit. There are several resources to explore for funding assistance. In the initial start-up phase, there should be an expectation of financial assistance from each agency involved.

Critical costs of forensic equipment to analyze computers and cellular telephones should be shared corporately. With the Sheriff's Department on board, it would seem feasible to use their lab because their labs are generally larger with more staff and equipment. Nevertheless, essential lab equipment and supplies, and a lab team should be available to provide basic forensic analysis, photography, fingerprint collection, etc.

An operational budget should be given thorough discussion and planning. To achieve full support from participating agencies, minimizing costs to each agency would be the most advantageous course to follow.

#### Prioritizing and Assigning Cases

In discussion with the group of Santa Barbara County colleagues, one of the more critical issues that individual agencies were concerned with was that they be assured priority when a critical incident / crime does occur. To make this a consistent practice, communication lines must be established that will provide effective and reliable response to needs as they arise. Defining the scope of crime investigated by this unit will also involve communication and management between all participants. The tendency in a task force is to provide too wide a scope of responsibility which causes unclear objectives, work overload and minimizes the unit's effectiveness. Interestingly, this issue is currently affecting a State narcotics task force in Santa Barbara County<sup>16</sup>. Clearly defining crime type eligible for work by the team (e.g., homicide,

serial crimes, financial crimes, high tech crimes, etc.) will serve to minimize “mission creep” and enhance the effectiveness of the concept in the long term.

Regionalizing investigations may be more feasible and effective in communities that share boundaries, but do not currently share formal resources. An example of smaller-sized agencies that might benefit from this type of task force are the communities of Arroyo Grande, Grover Beach, Pismo Beach and Oceano, located in southern San Luis Obispo County. Several times in the past 20 years, the concept of merging these agencies has been proposed. While the individual agencies prefer to maintain their autonomy, budget constraints have now become a bigger focus. Rather than total consolidation, regionalizing certain aspects of their duties might improve service delivery to their communities. Chief Jeff Norton of the Pismo Beach Police Department said of this concept of regionalization, “I like the idea of sharing resources, but I would not support giving up one of my two detectives to a task force unless new task force positions could be grant-funded. I would then be more supportive of this plan.”<sup>17</sup> Chief James Copsey of the Grover Beach Police Department said the agencies in the south San Luis Obispo County currently meet and share information and equipment when necessary, but do not have a written agreement in place to solidify the partnership.”<sup>18</sup> He also believed that grant funding would make this plan more feasible. He added that he is a proponent for forming at least a memorandum of agreement to hold agencies to some form of commitment.

As foreseen by the expert group, Chiefs in smaller communities support the theory behind regionalizing criminal investigations for improved quality of investigations. Both chiefs, though, were quick to point out staffing concerns, written agreements and resource sharing as essential to working closely together in small communities. There will be obstacles that arise that

seem insurmountable at first appearance. Working together and communicating these issues will be the first step to form a cooperative and lasting partnership in criminal investigation sharing.

### Conclusion

With the declining financial picture affecting all communities today, it is vitally important to remind planners this proposal is a new approach to assess how cities can conduct business differently for the future. We must plan to take these new ideas, analyze them, garner support and approval and begin the implementation of new business practices now. New business strategies in government need to proceed more rapidly. This would be a change from the typical arduous bureaucratic processes that have plagued us in the past. With cooperative futures planning in mind, coupled with sufficient time for implementation and evaluation, forming a regional criminal investigations unit should provide better investigation results for prosecutors and enhanced safety efforts toward the public interest.

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<sup>1</sup> Associated Press. January 12, 2008. Aversa, Jeannine. Sales tumble, fanning recession fears.

<sup>2</sup> Los Angeles Times. January 31, 2009. Reynolds and Nicholas. GDP Slides 3.8%, Worst since 1982.

<sup>3</sup> Boston Globe. March 17, 2007. Asinof, L. Will I get crushed by the subprime fallout?

<sup>4</sup> Greenspan, Alan. October 24, 2008. National Public Radio. Naylor, Brian. Greenspan Calls Financial Crisis a Credit Tsunami.

<sup>5</sup> Swarzenegger, Arnold. January 7, 2009. Office of the Governor. Governor's Remarks.

<sup>6</sup> Watkins, B. (2008, March 28). *Economic Forecast 2008*. Change of leadership.

<sup>7</sup> Marois, Michael. Bloomberg.com. Vallejo, California, Plans to File for Bankruptcy. May 7, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Hawthorne, J. Kent., Jan. 1997. California Command College Class 23. Regional Consolidation of Law Enforcement Support Services.

<sup>9</sup> California Police Officer Standards and Training. Training Bulletin No. 2008-11. Expenditure Reduction Actions for Fiscal Year 2008/09

<sup>10</sup> Bonaventure, Paul. Folsom Police Department Captain. February 7, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Ralston, Larry. April, 2008. Nominal Group Technique. Lompoc Police Department.

<sup>12</sup> Rohrs, S. (May 8, 2008), The Mercury News. City of Vallejo to Declare Bankruptcy.

<sup>13</sup> Walsh, D. (October 24, 2002). World Socialist Website. The Wahington Sniper and the undercurrent of rage in American society.

<sup>14</sup> Legislative Analyst's Office. (2006). Sex Offenders, SVP's Punishment. Proposition 83.

<sup>15</sup> Wyoming Division of Criminal Investigation. <http://attorneygeneral.state.wy.us/dci>.

<sup>16</sup> Santa Barbara Regional Narcotics Enforcement Team Task Force. SBRNET.

<sup>17</sup> Norton, Jeff. Pismo Beach Chief of Police. March 13, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Copsey, James, Grover Beach Chief of Police. March 16, 2009.