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National Evaluation of WEED & SEED - Cross-Site Analysis

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Operation Weed and Seed represents an ambitious Federal, State, and local attempt to improve the quality of life in targeted high-crime areas of America's cities. First launched by the U.S. Department of Justice in 1991, the program is designed to control violent crime, drug trafficking, and drug-related crime and to provide a safe environment in which residents can live, work, and raise their families.

These are, by themselves, conventional law enforcement goals. What makes Weed and Seed distinctive and innovative is that it couples community-focused human services programs and neighborhood improvement initiatives with intensified geographically targeted law enforcement efforts.

Weed and Seed is administered by the Executive Office for Weed and Seed within the U.S. Department of Justice. Weed and Seed is considered a strategy, not a program. That is, Weed and Seed is a means to mobilize resources in coordinated efforts, not simply a mechanism to fund local activities that share no collective aim. The key components of this strategy are as follows:

- **Weeding**—law enforcement efforts to remove violent offenders, drug traffickers, and other criminals from the target areas.
- **Seeding**—human services and neighborhood revitalization efforts to prevent and deter further crime.
- **Community policing**—proactive police-community engagement and problem solving, in which police personnel are accountable for specified geographic locations, regarded as “the bridge between weeding and seeding.”

The number of sites served by Weed and Seed has grown rapidly since the program's inception and currently stands at 200 sites. Eight sites participated in this national evaluation: Akron, Ohio; Hartford, Connecticut; Las Vegas, Nevada; Manatee and Sarasota Counties, Florida; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Salt Lake City, Utah; Seattle, Washington; and Shreveport, Louisiana. Each of these sites had distinctive crime problems. However, they all shared high rates of violent crime related to drug trafficking and drug use.

The national evaluation incorporated a wide variety of activities that included a review of funding applications and other significant program documents; individual interviews with key program administrators, senior law enforcement staff, managers of seeding activities, service providers (both current and former), and community leaders; analysis of automated, incident-level records provided by the local police departments on crimes and arrests; group interviews with participants in seeding programs; and two surveys of residents in target areas conducted in 1995 by the Institute for Social Analysis and in 1997 by Abt Associates Inc.

Organizational roles and community engagement

Grantee organization. The grantee and its staff assigned to the Weed and Seed effort were among the most important factors in successful program implementation at the eight evaluation sites. Sites without sufficient dedicated staff resources, from both grantees and other participating agencies, suffered in program implementation, oversight, and cohesion.

Steering committees. The role and composition of steering committees varied among sites. Some steering committees were dominated by public-sector representatives, whereas others were more heavily represented and

guided by community residents. For several sites, the steering committee or Weed and Seed resident bodies provided a critical means of resident participation in program decision-making.

Building trust and community capacity. Several of the evaluation sites encountered early community resistance to Weed and Seed because residents were concerned that the exclusive focus would be on enforcement or targeted harassment. The clear lesson from these experiences was the importance of involving residents early in Weed and Seed planning, providing residents with substantial program authority, and earning their trust. The seeding program component was typically the means through which community trust was built and participation fulfilled.

To implement Weed and Seed, considerable resources were devoted to effectively catalyze participation and increase capacity—even when sites had a strong preexisting community organizational infrastructure. Weed and Seed sites that employed a bottom-up, grassroots approach built trust among residents and community-based leaders and enhanced community capacity.

Approach to law enforcement

Law enforcement approaches across the eight sites typically included:

- Increased police presence through additional personnel hours and overtime, with the majority of sites assigning dedicated officers to the target area.
- Increased special operations for targeted law enforcement.
- Varying degrees of increased local, State, and Federal coordination, whether in targeting offenders, narcotics operations, prosecution, or probation/parole. Local responses ranged from increased communications via monthly meetings to the creation of formal interagency and multijurisdictional task force operations housed at the same facility.
- Greater concentration, coordination, and integration of efforts within police departments than before Weed

and Seed and increased integration of law enforcement with seeding-type activities.

- Expanded or strengthened community policing efforts or instituted new programs.
- Mobilized residents who participate in crime prevention, in some cases creating effective structures for community authority and leadership. Responses ranged from increasing neighborhood watches, holding community meetings, and receiving guidance on law enforcement priorities from a citizens' advisory committee.

Although weeding typically involves less resident participation than seeding, communications between residents and the police seem to have increased across sites.

Overall, prosecution has been a relatively weak link in Weed and Seed due to various institutional, political, and judicial issues. In the majority of sites, there was no special Federal or local prosecution or tracking of Weed and Seed cases. In many sites, however, communication and coordination between law enforcement personnel and prosecutors improved.

Approach to seeding

Among the greatest challenges for Weed and Seed sites was to develop an appropriate seeding strategy with community members that effectively used Weed and Seed resources and leveraged existing community resources. Simply selecting and successfully implementing seeding programs, such as safe havens, were more difficult for most sites than implementing weeding programs, with some sites initially stumbling at this stage. Seeding was inherently a broader and more complex task, both in the development of goals and strategies and in practical organization. Seeding efforts required engaging participation and commitment from numerous types of organizations, whereas weeding had a relatively clearer mission, operating within the more established hierarchical structures of law enforcement and criminal justice organizations. Due to the broader and less defined nature of seeding, more time was needed for planning, relationship-building, and gaining consensus and

commitment from the wide range of participants who shaped this domain.

The eight Weed and Seed sites tried to build their programs around existing resources, in addition to creating new partnerships. Seeding program partners and providers emphasized how Weed and Seed increased coordination and communication links across neighborhood groups and other agencies. Weed and Seed sites reflected different emphases in funding local seeding programs—with varying degrees of program breadth, depth, and duration. In several sites, providing communities with authority in the seeding grant award process was critical to gaining community participation and trust.

Youth programs were the primary focus of seeding activity, followed by basic neighborhood beautification efforts. Seeding initiatives undertaken by the evaluation sites can be clustered in the following order of predominance:

- Prevention/intervention programs for youths, with a strong mix of programs.
- Neighborhood beautification, such as community cleanups and code enforcement.
- Community building and community development initiatives.
- Adult employment and economic advancement programs.
- Family support services aimed at adults.
- Community economic development facilitation.

Crime trends

Across the eight sites, crime patterns varied widely. In comparing the number of Part 1 crimes in the year prior to Weed and Seed implementation with the second year of Weed and Seed, five target areas had double-digit percentage decreases (Stowe Village in Hartford, 46 percent; Crawford-Roberts in Pittsburgh, 24 percent; North Manatee, 18 percent; the Shreveport target area, 11 percent; and the Central District in Seattle, 10 percent).¹ One target area

(West Las Vegas) had a single-digit decrease (6 percent), and three target areas experienced increases in Part 1 crime (South Manatee, 2 percent; Meadows Village in Las Vegas, 9 percent; and Salt Lake City, 14 percent). During this same time period, in six of nine target areas—Hartford, Pittsburgh (Crawford-Roberts), North Manatee, South Manatee, Shreveport, West Las Vegas—the Part 1 crime rates improved more than in the rest of the city or county. Also, Part 1 crimes in the Salt Lake City target area and South Manatee decreased in 1997, the latest reporting period.

Although it is not possible to state definitively the extent to which different factors contributed to the observed changes in crime, a number of factors appear to have a strong correlation with these changes. For example, Hartford and Pittsburgh, which experienced the largest Part 1 crime decreases in nontarget areas, are the same two sites whose target areas achieved the largest Part 1 crime decreases. At the same time, the site with the largest Part 1 crime increase in its target area—Salt Lake City—also exhibited the largest Part 1 crime increase of all target areas.

A relationship also appears to exist between crime trends and the concentration of program resources in sites that had the largest increases or decreases in crime. Hartford, for example, has the smallest target area in terms of population and area, while Salt Lake City has the largest single target area in square miles and, along with Akron, the smallest level of Federal Weed and Seed funding.

Finally, changes in the drug arrest rates appear to be associated with changes in the Part 1 crime rate. For example, among the six target areas for which arrest data are available, the four reporting decreases in Part 1 crime from the year prior to Weed and Seed through the second year of implementation (Hartford, Pittsburgh, North Manatee, and Shreveport) all experienced initial high rates of drug arrests—suggesting an initial period of intense weeding activities—followed by declining drug arrest rates. Assuming the level of enforcement as measured by police presence has remained somewhat constant, this trend reflects success in reducing drug activity. The Salt Lake City and South Manatee target areas both experienced large increases in the number of drug arrests in 1997 compared

to 1996, suggesting that perhaps these sites had not yet succeeded in reducing the level of drug activity in the target areas. Thus, across these six sites, the changes in drug arrest volumes follow the same general pattern as the changes in Part 1 crimes.

Community survey

To understand the perspective of community residents, a survey of target area residents was conducted for all eight sites at two separate time intervals—in 1995 and 1997. The objective of the survey data collection was to measure changes in residents' perceptions of public safety, crime, police performance, general neighborhood quality of life, and awareness of the Weed and Seed program.

To the extent possible, the same methodology was used in both surveys. There were, however, some notable differences. The 1995 survey consisted of inperson interviews, while the 1997 interviews were conducted by telephone. In addition, the 1997 survey consisted of fewer questions than the 1995 survey. The decision to proceed in 1997 with telephone interviewing and a shortened instrument was based on the difficulties experienced in 1995 in completing the targeted number of interviews per site.

The methodological differences between the two surveys, combined with underlying population changes in the evaluation sites, led to a shift between 1995 and 1997 in the demographic profile of respondents in each surveyed target area. A decision was made to focus the survey analysis on a demographically comparable subset of respondents: nonelderly, long-term residents.

The sites appear to fall into three groups with respect to the overall pattern of survey findings comparing 1995 and 1997 among nonelderly, long-term residents.

- Manatee and Pittsburgh exhibited substantial evidence of changes in residents' perceptions across multiple outcome measures, including severity of crime and police effectiveness in controlling crime.
- Akron, Hartford, and Seattle exhibited some evidence of changes in residents' perceptions of selected crime

dimensions, either drug-related crime (Akron and Seattle) or violent and gang-related crime (Hartford).

- Las Vegas, Salt Lake City, and Shreveport exhibited little evidence of changes in residents' perceptions of general public safety or the severity of specific types of crime in the neighborhood.

Participant interviews

To gain the perspective of community residents whom the seeding programs were intended to benefit, interviews were conducted with seeding program participants. These interviews were not intended to measure outcomes of the programs that were visited; rather, they were designed to learn the perceived benefits and drawbacks of the programs from the individuals who participated in them. Long-term effects of these programs on the lives of the program participants cannot be deduced from the interviews.

The seeding programs that were visited fall into three general categories: (1) youth recreation and education; (2) employment and training; and (3) violence prevention. Based on participants' comments, the seeding programs appeared to provide services that otherwise would not have been available in the target areas. Most of those interviewed also indicated that participation in the seeding programs was a positive experience that helped them feel more secure emotionally, physically, or both. The general themes that emerged focused on providing additional structure and discipline in the lives of target area youths and opportunities and assistance for adults to work toward personal and professional growth.

Conclusions

The experience of the eight participating Weed and Seed sites raised two questions: Are sites achieving the intended changes in measurable outcomes? What factors appear to promote successful implementation of the program and thus promote achievement of the intended results?

Based on the pattern of findings with respect to the rate of Part 1 crimes and crime-related survey questions, one can group the sites into four categories, first according to

the evidence of reduced Part 1 crimes and then (within each category) according to the evidence of improved public perceptions:

- Hartford and Pittsburgh showed strong evidence of reduced Part 1 crimes and improved public perception of crime-related measures.
- Manatee/Sarasota (North Manatee) and Shreveport exhibited substantial evidence of reduced Part 1 crimes.
- Seattle, Akron, Las Vegas (West Las Vegas), and Manatee/Sarasota (South Manatee) exhibited some evidence of reduced Part 1 crimes.
- Salt Lake City and Las Vegas (Meadows Village) showed no evidence of reduced Part 1 crimes.

Those sites in the first group (Hartford and Pittsburgh) stand out among the rest, with strong evidence of favorable outcomes with respect to both crime and public perceptions of crime.

Factors favoring successful implementation of Weed and Seed

What factors appear to have promoted successful implementation of the program and achievement of the program's intended results? To address this question, one needs to consider the site characteristics and program features that appear to distinguish the target areas as categorized above, according to their measurable crime-related outcomes.

Community setting. There are preexisting features of the program setting that may make Weed and Seed easier or more difficult to operate effectively. Important factors included the strength of the social and institutional infrastructure, the severity of crime problems, locational advantages favoring economic development, and transiency of the community population.

Program design. The mix of weeding and seeding activities and the sequence of component implementation appear to be important factors in gaining community sup-

port for the program. Important factors included early seeding, sustained weeding, high-level task forces combined with community policing, and an active prosecutorial role.

Concentration of funds. Sites appeared to have greater success if they concentrated their program resources on smaller populations, especially if they could similarly channel other public funds and leverage private funds. The important factors included funding intensity along with channeling and leveraging other funds.

Leadership and partnership. Finally, a less tangible ingredient that seemed to characterize the more successful programs was the active and constructive leadership of key individuals. By its very nature, Weed and Seed places a great premium on effective coordination among groups with different organizational missions, responding to different constituencies. To establish effective working relationships among these organizations required personal energy and initiative.

The most effective implementation strategies were those that relied on bottom-up participatory decisionmaking approaches, especially when combined with efforts to build capacity and partnership among local organizations. This required a longer term perspective about the program and its potential to bring about community change. Such sites—including some that achieved substantial crime reductions within the time period analyzed here—have established a stronger foundation and more sustainable basis for further community-targeted initiatives.

Strategic choices

The strategic choices now faced by policymakers in charting the future direction of Weed and Seed revolve around issues of designating sites for continued funding, selecting sites for new awards, and allocating funds among participating sites over time.

The experience of the eight sites studied in this evaluation suggests that Weed and Seed has affected the target areas through either (or both) of two avenues. The first, termed *program effectiveness* here, relates to the specific initiatives that focus on law enforcement and crime

prevention. The second, called *community mobilization* here, is the process in which Weed and Seed provides a catalyst for greater involvement of neighborhood residents and community-based organizations.

In the interest of program effectiveness and successful community mobilization, the following inferences can be drawn from site experiences:

- **Weed and Seed should seek the highest feasible concentration of funds in the program sites.** Given the annual funding constraint provided by the congressional appropriation, this implies a more selective process in choosing sites to receive new awards and/or some shortening in the number of years that ongoing sites receive program funding.
- **Weed and Seed should place its funding priority on sites with geographically small target areas and with favorable community settings and program-**

matic designs when selecting new program sites—i.e., with features favoring successful implementation, as described in chapter 5.

- **Weed and Seed should consider additional effort in providing technical assistance to the funded sites, given the importance of institutional capacity-building and infrastructure development.** The lessons learned from the more successful sites—and the less successful ones—on these issues can be generalized to a large degree, and new sites should receive the benefit of this experience. This seems especially important in promoting the partnership arrangements that characterize the more successful programs examined in this research.

Note

1. Part 1 crimes include homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, and auto theft.