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# TELEMASP BULLETIN

## TEXAS LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATIVE STATISTICS PROGRAM

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December 1994

Vol. 1, No. 9

MAR 07 1995

### Crime Specific Policing in Houston

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Current Houston Mayor Bob Lanier ran against the former incumbent on a strong law and order platform. During the campaign the key plank in his platform became more 'cops on the beat'. While a candidate, Lanier promised an additional police officer for every square mile in the Houston city limits—the 655 square miles providing a significant but attainable benchmark to measure enhanced police presence. The goal became tagged the '655 Program' (pronounced six five five, not six hundred fifty-five), and the term has stuck.

After election Lanier kept his promise of more officers by implementing a structured overtime program to immediately place 655 FTE new officers on the streets, while gearing up the Academy to train new recruits. Moreover, a dramatic change in policing style occurred with the employment of Sam Nuchia as the new chief. Previous efforts to establish Houston as the showcase of community policing were abandoned in favor of crime specific policing. Proactive patrol and investigative methods resulted in substantial increases in arrests. Crime dropped dramatically. Clearly a challenge to the tenets of community policing, the current policing style in Houston has drawn international attention.

Thus what must be understood is that six five five has come to mean more than increased police staffing. It is now a code word for the dramatic change in policing style in Houston, such that when it is stated that "Since 655, crime in Houston has dropped dramatically," what one broadly means is "Since the totality of changes since January 1992, crime has dropped dramatically" rather than narrowly "Since adding 655 FTE officers . . ."

The term "655 Program" has been imposed by popular usage. Police Chief Sam Nuchia has assiduously avoided catch-word encapsulation of policies/strategies. Given the fact that Neighborhood-Oriented Patrol, redubbed "Nobody

on Patrol," became a lightning rod term in the Houston Police Department, the current avoidance of program nomenclature is understandable. Many other agencies have learned as well that clever naming of initiatives or strategies can backfire, and wisely avoid doing so. But sometimes there is a price to be paid when critics name a program for you. That has occurred to some extent in Houston. The '655' nomenclature is relatively harmless, but it is also not descriptive. Harm has been done by critics who have termed the Nuchia administration's proactive strategy merely a 'return to traditional policing'. The current policing style in Houston has never before been done in that agency, and a characterization as traditional policing as that term is understood in law enforcement circles nationally is inappropriate. It is anything but traditional.

The style is a product of the complex intersecting of a philosophy, several strategies, and a multiplicity of programs. Although one always risks distortion with simplification, the basic tenets are as follows:

**Philosophy.** Police agencies can impact the level of crime and disorder in a community. The police do make a difference. Saying that crime and disorder are a product of social and economic forces the police cannot and should not affect, is rejected. Concomitantly, policing should be crime focused. The broad police mission remains peace keeping or order maintenance, but crime is recognized as the central focus of efforts. Wholesale neighborhood restructuring, as well as generic community quality of life issues, are regarded as outside the police mission.

**Endemic Strategies.** A crime focused macro strategy subsumes several 'embedded', long-term, micro strategies. These endemic strategies include proactive, aggressive patrol, proactive and crime specific investigative efforts, and



community communication centered on neighborhood security (not quality of life).

**Programs.** Within the context of the endemic strategies may be a multiplicity of programs. Since January 1992, the Houston patrol division has engaged in a parole violator apprehension program, saturation patrol in targeted areas, directed patrol, and zero tolerance patrol. Investigative efforts have included proactive endeavors focused on several offense types, including auto theft and burglary. Community communication includes maintenance of several store-front stations, participation in a "positive interaction program" (structured community meetings) by command staff, a citizens on patrol program and several school programs.

The permutation of the "police do make a difference" philosophy through the department since 1992 cannot be overstated. There are significant operational effects of the philosophy. If the police can make a difference, then it makes a difference how rapidly the police arrive at a disorderly scene, and response time becomes important. No one in the Houston Police Department disputes the validity of the findings in the response time studies in Kansas City; what they challenge is the policy interpretation. Rather than "Since apprehension is affected by response time in only 1% to 3% of calls, you might as well take your time getting there," the philosophy bespeaks "If the chances of apprehension are increased by rapid response 1 of every 30 times, then you better well move it when dispatch calls." Considerable media attention has been given to reductions in response times since January 1992.

#### A Contextual Note on Approaches to Policing

Never before in the history of policing has the issue of role and mission been so extensively discussed. Agency administrators find themselves pressured to declare an 'orientation', or macro strategy, for their department. Preeminent among competing 'broad approaches' is community policing. Despite its popularity, community policing lacks definition. At its broadest, community policing requires only that new forms of community interaction be developed. At the other extreme, community policing entails comprehensive management of neighborhoods by police departments. In any case, police administrators feel compelled to assert that they are 'doing community policing'. Even if not meaningful for a given agency, the approach is politically correct.

Running a distant second among popular approaches to policing is problem-oriented policing. Although regarded by some as merely one strategy of several embedded in community policing, problem-oriented policing, in fact, is a distinct approach. Problem-oriented policing entails expansion of the repertoire of interventions such that long-term solutions to recurrent police problem situations are effected. 'Problems' may entail either crime or other situations police are called upon to handle. Although enhanced community interaction is often involved in the application of problem-oriented interventions, it is not necessarily the case.

Both community policing and problem-oriented policing are offered as alternatives to so-called traditional policing. Traditional policing, also characterized as the professional model and/or incident driven policing, is regarded as passive, non-directive, and potentially destructive of positive police-community interaction. Whether this is true is open to debate. In any case, what is lost in the rhetoric is a fourth alternative—which is not only philosophically attractive but is actually practiced by innumerable police agencies. The alternative is crime specific policing.

Space in this bulletin does not allow a complete discussion of the four approaches. Suffice it to say here that both the Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas and the Police Research Center at Sam Houston State University are committed to open discussion and exploration of the affirmative issues surrounding all four approaches. Past TELEMASP Bulletins have addressed programs intrinsically part of community policing, such as citizens' police academies and citizens on patrol. This bulletin addresses a dramatically contrasting approach employed in Houston since January 1992. We have chosen to characterize the approach as illustrative of crime specific policing. Such a characterization is, we wish to emphasize, our own.

Houston was held up in the 1980s as exemplary of community policing efforts. Although many of the programs implemented in Houston under the rubric of community policing have continued under the tutelage of Chief Sam Nuchia, the cornerstone program, neighborhood-oriented patrol, was unceremoniously eliminated in favor of aggressive crime specific strategies. Concurrent to this change, crime has dropped precipitously. The focus of this bulletin is upon the changes in arrest, charging, and incident rates in Houston since January 1992, the implementation date of crime specific policing. Clearly, the increase in arrest and charging rates, with a concomitant drop in incident rates, challenges the major tenets of community policing. With a national Crime Act premised upon placing officers on the beat to 'do community policing', this is a charged political issue. The change in policing approach in Houston has drawn international attention.

## Analysis

Table 1 depicts UCR crime statistics from 1989 through 1993 for Houston and, to provide comparison, the five other largest cities in Texas. The combined cities' statistics are a summation of data from the five other cities in the table. The offenses of burglary, robbery, and auto theft are listed separately. Also listed is Suppressible Part I, which is a summation of burglary, robbery, and auto theft. The data indicate that crime in urban Texas has dropped in all of the categories listed. Note that Houston's drop in crime occurred predominately in 1992; the other cities and the state as a whole dropped more in 1993.

Tables 2 and 3 contain summary data on the total amount of crimes in the aforementioned categories for Houston and the other five largest cities both 30 months pre- and 30 months post-655 implementation (January 1992). Houston had substantially greater drops in offense incidents among all categories. The 27.8% drop in Suppressible Part I offenses represents a 34.4% greater decline than the 20.7% drop in the comparison cities.

Figures 1 through 5 graph the month-to-month crime figures for Houston between July 1989 and June 1994 (30 months pre/post). Reported crime decreased between 1989 and 1994 overall. Of note is that there is a precipitous drop in several crimes that corresponds with the implementation of 655 in January of 1992. The charts show the seasonal peaks associated with crime, usually in July. Of particular importance is the fact that the peaks before the 655 program are substantially higher than the seasonal peaks after 655. This is exemplified in Figure 4, Suppressible Part I Crimes (burglary, robbery, auto theft), where the peaks in July 1989, 1990, and 1991 are substantially greater than in July 1992, 1993 and 1994.

Robbery (Figure 1) dropped from an average of 1,070.9 to 899.1 cases per month, a 171.76 average per month drop ( $p < .0001$ ). Auto theft (Figure 2) dropped from 3,359.1 to 2,332.2 cases per month, a 1,026.93 average per month drop ( $p < .0001$ ). Burglary (Figure 3) dropped from 3,536.8 to 2,307.3 cases per month, a 1,229.5 average per month decrease ( $p < .0001$ ). Total Part I (Figure 5) offenses dropped from 15,339.6 to 11,774.5 cases per month, a 3,565.1 average per month decrease ( $p < .0001$ ). Non-violent Part I offenses (burglary, theft, auto theft, arson) dropped from 13,346.8 to 9,733.9 cases per month, a 3,612.87 average decrease per month ( $p < .0001$ ). Of note is that all major UCR Part I offenses dropped significantly except for aggravated assault which increased from 767.3 to 1,010.2 cases per month, an average increase of 242.9 cases per month ( $p < .0001$ ) (see the inset box, Cooking the Books?).

### Cooking the Books?

An immediate response by skeptics is that Houston must be manipulating the reporting/recording of Part I offenses. A full analysis of the issue is obviously beyond the scope of this bulletin. However, members of the Police Research Center did visit with a representative of the Texas Department of Public Safety Uniform Crime Reporting Section. The emphatic response was that there is no indication of changes in reporting/recording practices. Another fact which must be noted is the increase in aggravated assault in 1992. It is generally accepted that no other Part I offense is more subject to definitional ambiguity (and hence susceptibility to manipulation) than aggravated assault. If anything, the otherwise unexplained increase in this offense rate indicates more, not less, assiduous reporting/recording.

Part II offenses in Houston followed a trend exactly opposite that of Part I offenses. Note that many Part II offenses are actually arrests (as opposed to reported offenses), and thus indicative of proactive, aggressive policing. Detection and reports of Part II offenses and non-criminal incidents increased dramatically following implementation of 655. Whereas Part I offenses dropped precipitously in January 1992, Part II offenses show a precipitous increase. Weapons offenses (Figure 6) increased an average of 40.5 offenses per month ( $p < .0001$ ). Similarly, DWI offenses (Figure 7) increased from 409.1 to 705.4 offenses per month, a 296.3 (72%) average per month increase ( $p < .0001$ ). Some Part II offenses decreased during this time, but the decrease was not significant. For example, vandalism decreased an average of 69.1 cases per month ( $p < .077$ ) and drug offenses decreased an average of 26.4 cases per month ( $p < .363$ ). However, in general, Part II offenses (Figure 8) increased in the two-and-one-half years following the implementation of 655. Part II offenses increased an average of 1,147.1 cases per month ( $p < .0001$ ).

'Public order' incidents increased an average of 1,060.7 cases per month ( $p < .0001$ ). This is graphically depicted in Figure 9 which shows the sharp increase in the number of curfew and loitering violations. These offense averages before 655 were essentially at zero. After 655, the average was 324.3 cases per month. This change represents better than any other statistic the pre/post difference in patrol strategy. Figure 10 depicts the narrowing of the gap between Part I and Part II offenses in Houston.

Of note as well is the narrowing of the standard deviations associated with several Part II offenses. For example, the



**Table 1**  
**Texas Major City Crime Statistics**  
**1989-1993**

	1989	1990	%change	1991	%change	1992	%change	1993	% change
<b><u>Houston</u></b>									
Burglary	47,043	42,986	-8.62	39,726	-7.58	30,207	-23.96	27,022	-10.54
Robbery	9,820	12,921	+31.58	13,883	+7.45	11,130	-19.83	10,772	-3.22
Auto Theft	39,726	40,853	+2.84	40,162	-1.69	30,938	-22.97	27,519	-11.05
Suppressible Part I	93,868	96,760	+3.08	93,771	-3.09	72,275	-22.92	65,313	-9.63
Total Part I	207,379	205,799	-0.76	211,428	+2.74	179,926	-14.90	175,543	-2.44
<b><u>Combined Cities</u></b>									
<b><u>(excluding Houston)</u></b>									
Burglary	106,913	95,224	-10.93	94,010	-1.27	78,940	-16.03	63,442	-19.63
Robbery	16,835	19,072	+13.29	21,497	+12.71	19,565	-8.99	16,265	-16.87
Auto Theft	59,635	58,125	-2.53	63,231	+8.78	55,178	-12.76	45,171	-18.14
Suppressible Part I	183,383	172,421	-5.98	178,738	+3.66	153,683	-14.02	124,878	-18.74
Total Part I	518,158	519,629	+0.28	525,773	+1.18	435,231	-7.71	438,698	-9.59
<b><u>Dallas</u></b>									
Burglary	38,652	32,975	-14.69	31,513	-4.43	24,806	-21.13	20,975	-15.44
Robbery	9,442	10,565	+11.89	11,254	+6.52	9,532	-15.30	7,420	-22.16
Auto Theft	27,299	24,513	-10.21	25,085	+2.33	20,515	-18.22	17,465	-14.87
Suppressible Part I	75,393	68,053	-9.74	67,852	-0.30	54,853	-19.16	45,860	-16.39
Total Part I	192,461	185,531	-3.61	186,077	+0.29	164,128	-11.80	145,749	-11.20
<b><u>San Antonio</u></b>									
Burglary	28,467	26,015	-8.61	24,941	-4.13	21,967	-11.92	17,866	-18.67
Robbery	2,710	2,864	+5.68	3,778	+31.91	3,485	-7.76	2,979	-14.52
Auto Theft	15,263	14,879	-2.52	14,413	-3.13	14,722	+2.14	11,796	-19.88
Suppressible Part I	46,440	43,758	-5.78	43,132	-1.43	40,174	-6.86	32,641	-18.75
Total Part I	127,364	124,631	-2.15	128,109	+2.79	118,922	-7.17	107,123	-9.92
<b><u>Austin</u></b>									
Burglary	11,160	11,371	+1.89	11,591	+1.93	10,208	-11.93	8,453	-17.19
Robbery	1,019	1,461	+43.38	1,555	+6.43	1,450	-6.75	1,555	+7.24
Auto Theft	2,707	3,819	+41.08	4,739	+24.09	4,570	-3.57	4,357	-4.68
Suppressible Part I	14,886	16,723	+12.34	17,885	+6.95	16,228	-9.26	14,365	-11.48
Total Part I	59,779	66,526	+11.29	65,106	-2.13	65,044	-0.10	64,365	-1.04
<b><u>Fort Worth</u></b>									
Burglary	17,216	15,298	-11.14	16,878	+10.33	14,304	-15.25	10,505	-26.56
Robbery	2,525	2,801	+10.93	3,426	+22.31	3,488	+1.81	2,750	-21.16
Auto Theft	8,974	9,206	+2.59	13,470	+46.32	9,940	-26.21	6,007	-39.57
Suppressible Part I	28,715	27,305	-4.91	33,774	+23.69	27,732	-17.89	19,262	-30.54
Total Part I	74,784	75,401	+0.83	86,633	+14.90	77,325	-10.74	62,150	-19.62
<b><u>El Paso</u></b>									
Burglary	11,418	9,565	-16.29	9,087	-5.00	7,655	-15.76	5,643	-26.28
Robbery	1,139	1,381	+21.25	1,484	+7.46	1,610	+8.49	1,561	-3.04
Auto Theft	5,392	5,636	+4.53	5,524	-1.99	5,431	-1.68	5,546	+2.12
Suppressible Part I	17,949	16,582	-7.62	16,095	-2.94	14,696	-8.69	12,750	-13.24
Total Part I	63,770	67,540	+5.91	59,848	-11.39	59,812	-0.06	59,311	-0.84



**Table 2**

**Houston Crime Statistics, Pre/Post 655**

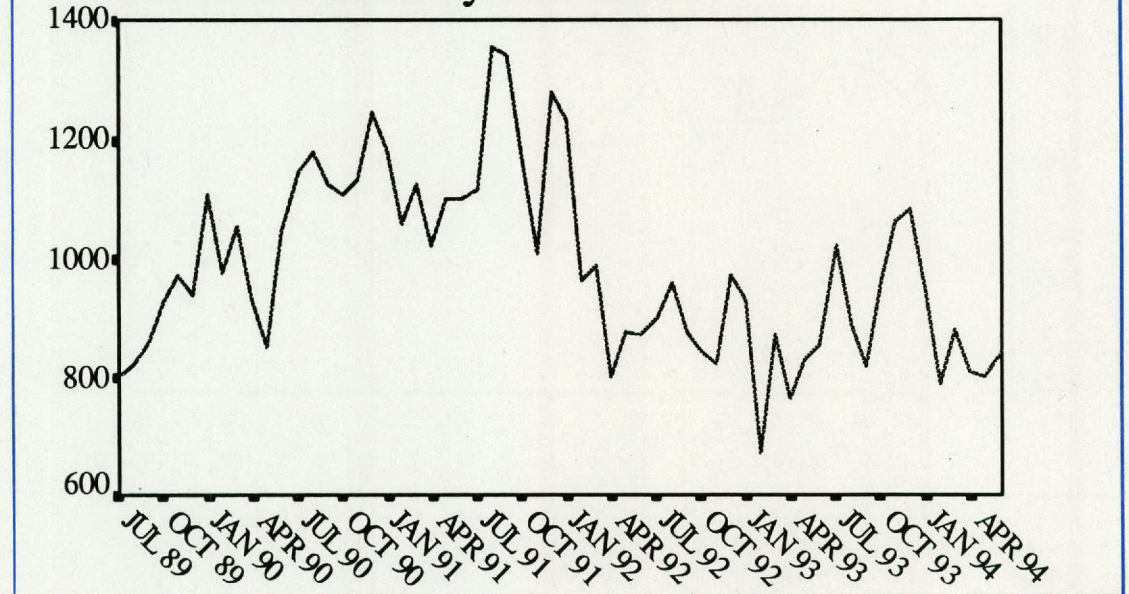
<b>Houston</b>	<b>Pre-655 (30 mos.)</b>	<b>Post-655 (30 mos.)</b>	<b>% Change</b>
Burglary	82,712	57,229	-30.81%
Robbery	26,804	21,902	-18.29%
Auto Theft	81,015	58,457	-27.84%
Suppressible Part I	190,531	137,588	-27.79%
Total Part I	417,227	355,469	-14.80%

**Table 3**

**Comparison Cities Crime Statistics, Pre/Post 655**

<b>Five Major Texas Cities</b>	<b>Pre-655 (30 mos.)</b>	<b>Post-655 (30 mos.)</b>	<b>% Change</b>
Burglary	189,234	142,382	-24.75%
Robbery	40,569	35,830	-11.68%
Auto Theft	121,356	100,349	-17.31%
Suppressible Part I	351,159	278,561	-20.67%
Total Part I	1,045,402	923,929	-11.62%

**Houston Robbery Incidents**



**Figure 1**

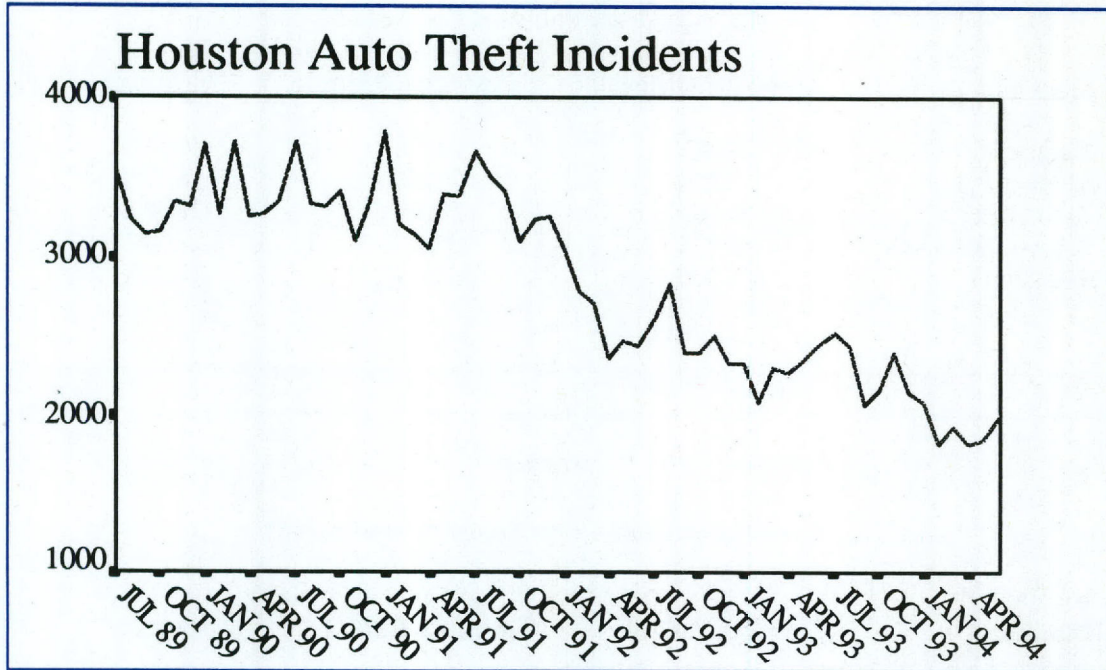


Figure 2

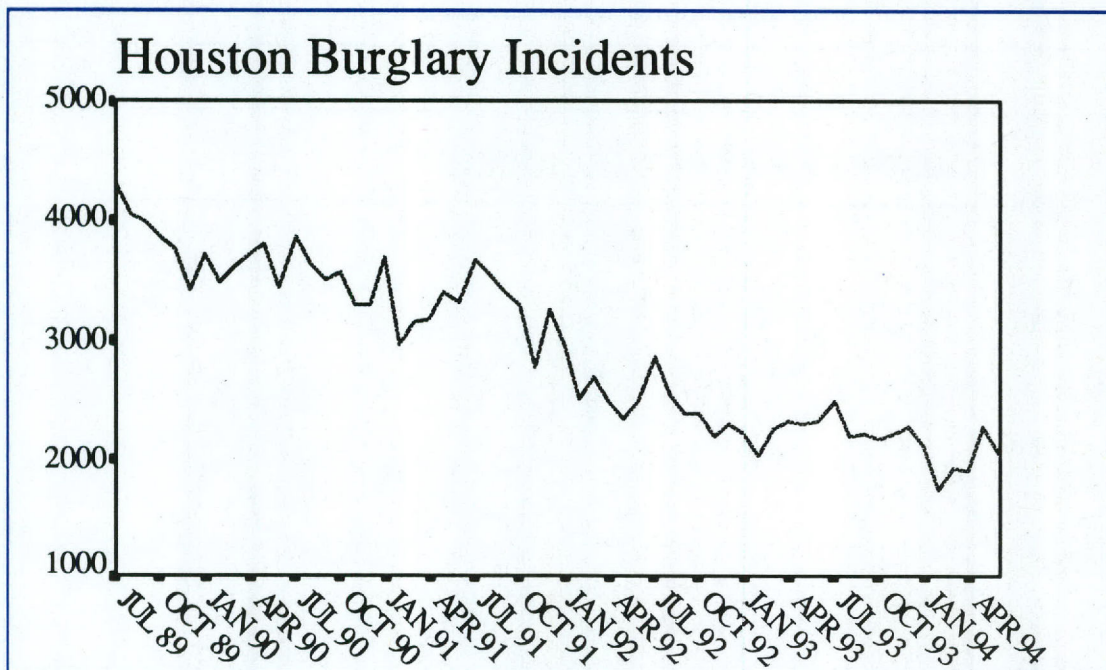


Figure 3

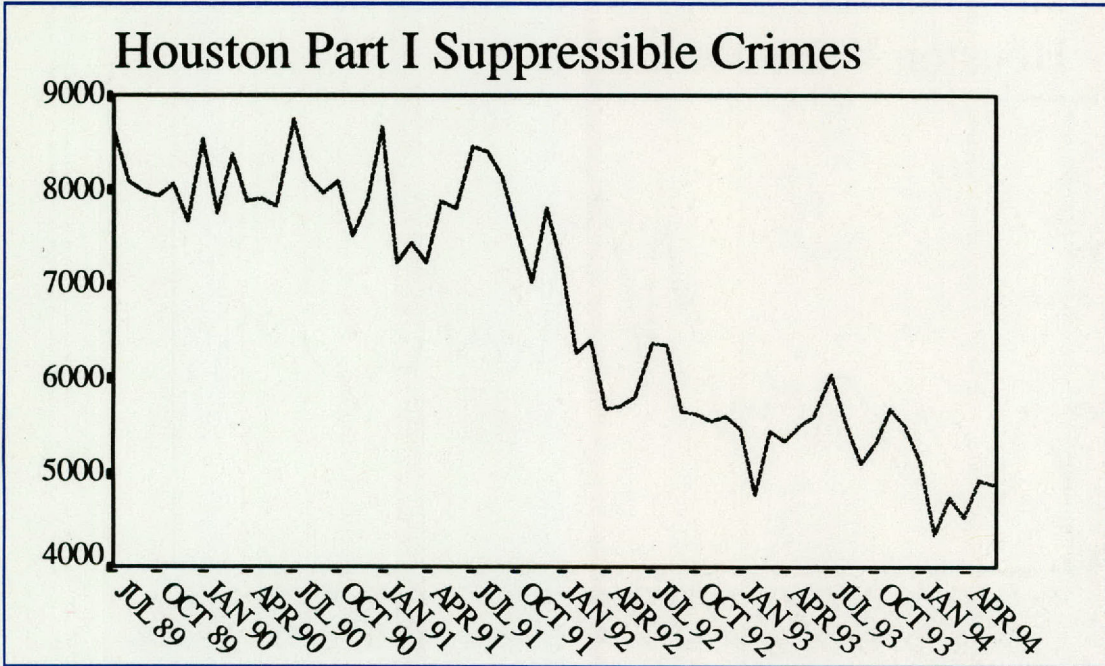


Figure 4

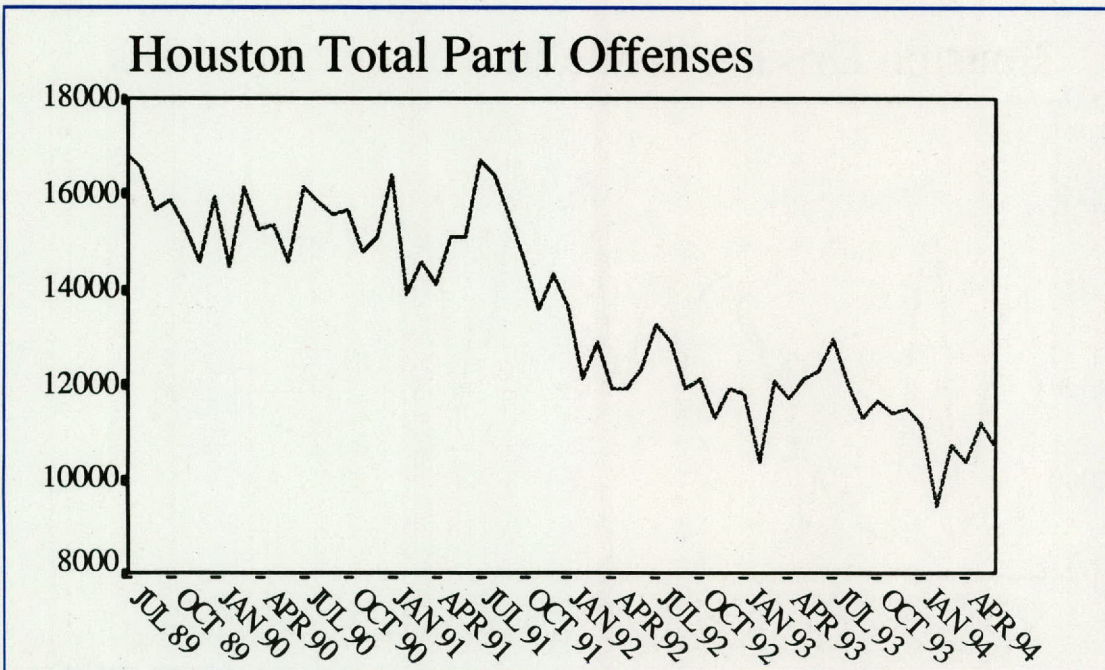


Figure 5

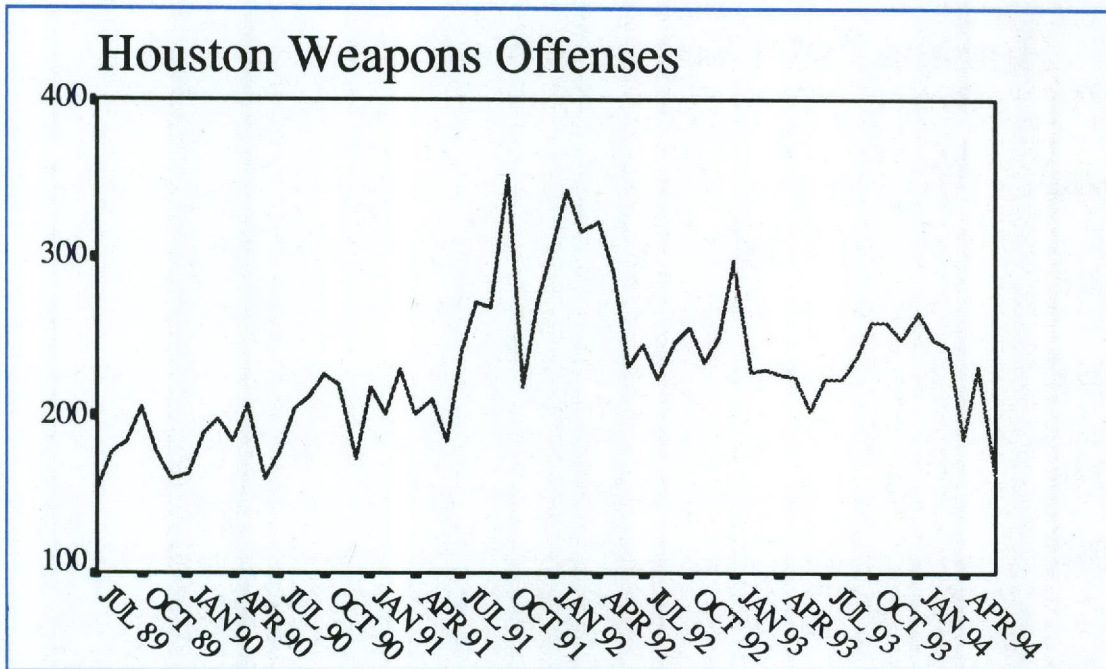


Figure 6

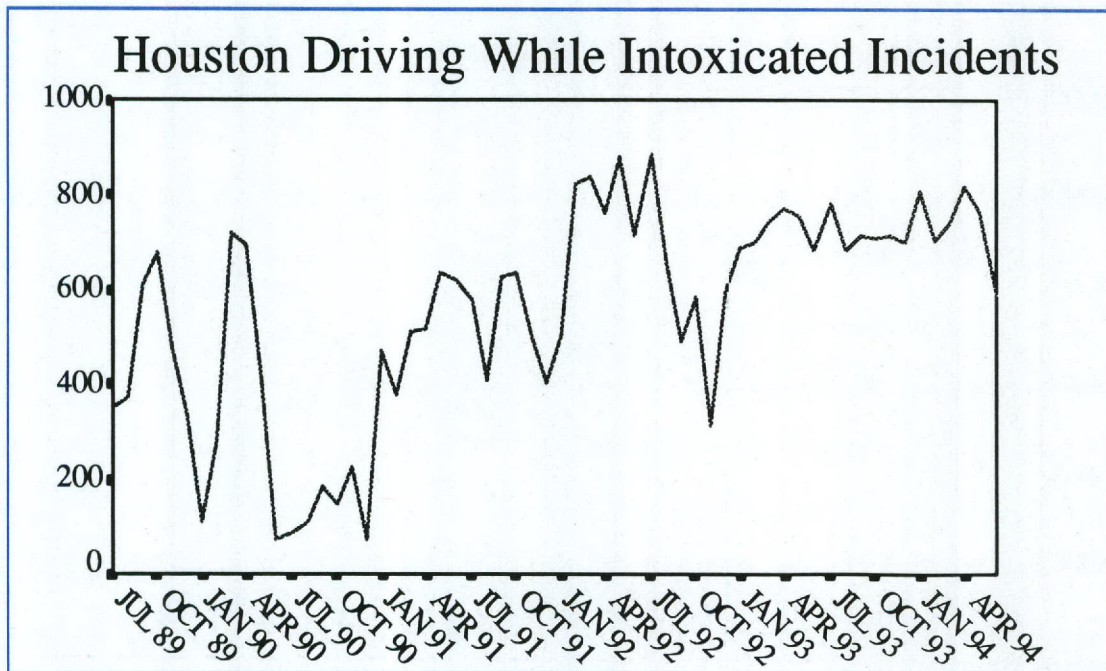


Figure 7



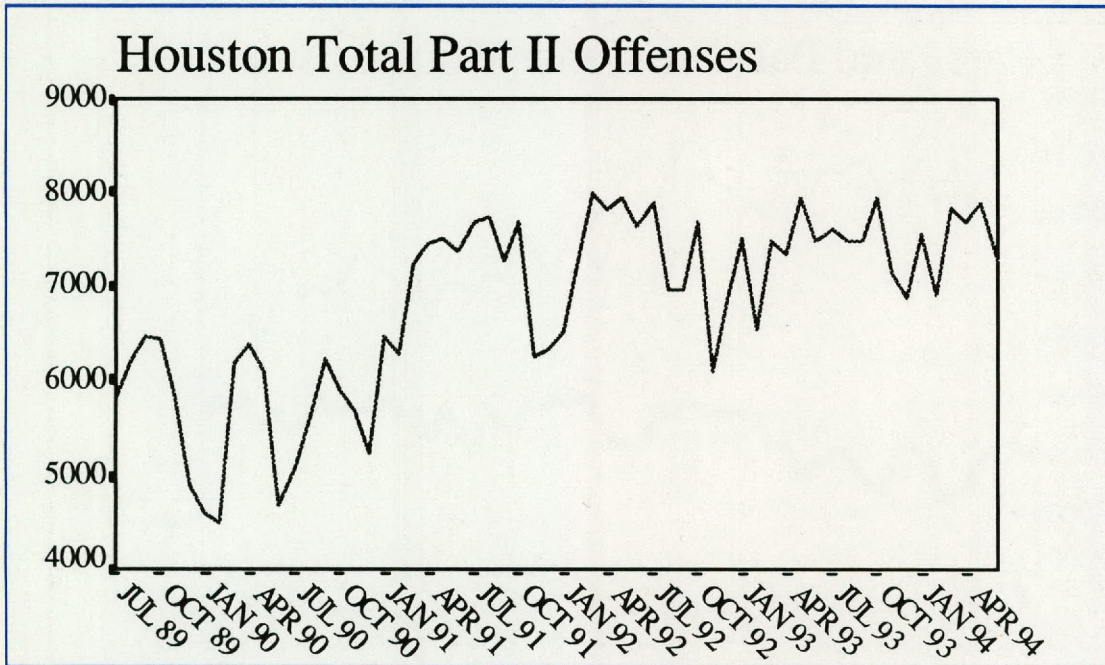


Figure 8

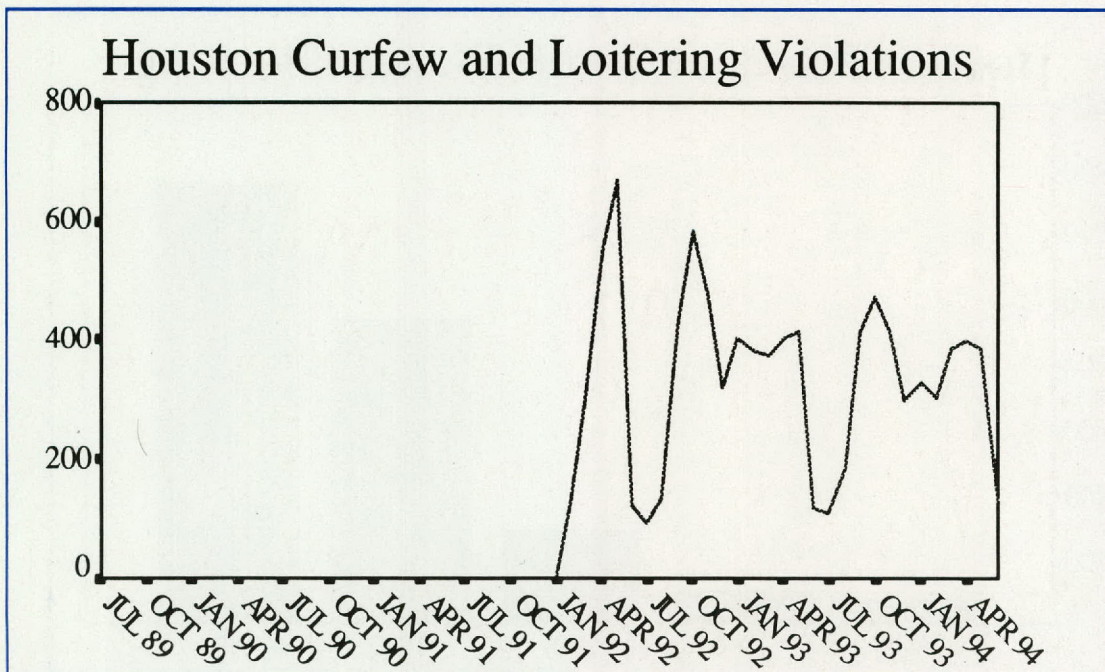


Figure 9

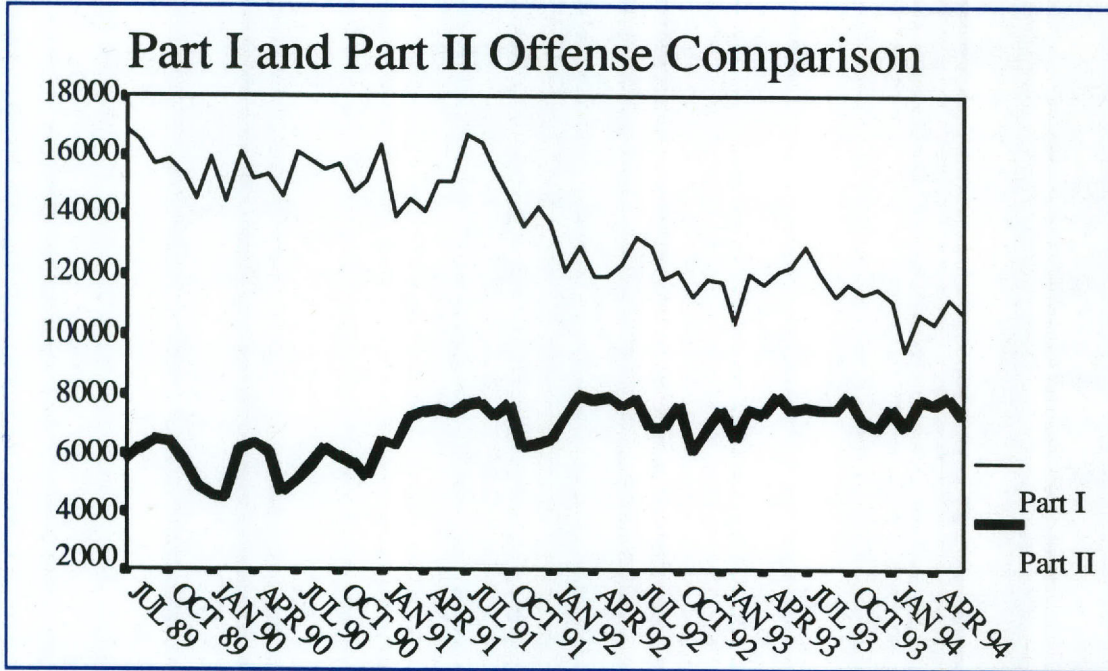


Figure 10

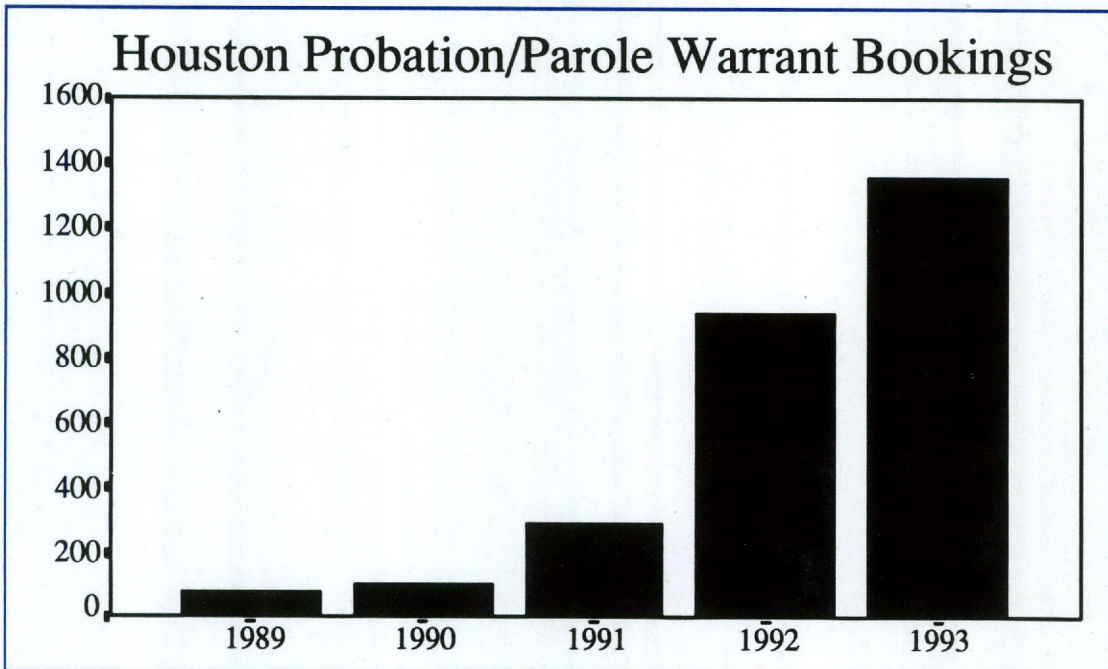


Figure 11

standard deviation of the mean of DWI offenses was 207.09 in the 30 months before 655 and 121.28 in the 30 months after. Narcotics offenses had a standard deviation of 145.66 pre-655 and 60.39 post-655. This can be seen graphically in the peaks and valleys depicted in Figure 8. The standard deviation for Part II offenses decreased by 460 pre- and post-655. The peaks and valleys of certain offenses, e.g., DWI, narcotics, theft, all flatten following implementation of 655. These offenses are typically associated with cyclical sting or task force operations. Additional officers on the street with the mission of proactive intervention will likely stabilize enforcement.

Data obtained from the Harris County Courts further substantiate the difference in patrol style before and after January 1992. Figure 11 depicts the dramatic increase in the number of probation/parole violator warrant bookings. One of the endeavors actively pursued by patrol officers since 1992 has been apprehension of violators.

#### Saturation Patrol

The Houston Police Department in the latter half of 1994 began a new saturation patrol program utilizing funds from the 655 program. Of 105 total beats in the city, the seven highest crime beats were identified by crime analysis (shoplifting was excluded so as not to skew the data in favor of beats with malls). During evening hours, four to six additional patrol units are assigned to each beat. The beats are located throughout the city, one in the northeast, three in the north, one on the west side, and two in the southwest section. The beats in each section are assigned to a different substation, and each substation has developed different approaches and tactics. The effect of the additional units in the beats is currently being studied by the Police Research Center at Sam Houston State University. An evaluation of this program will be disseminated in 1995.

### Discussion

The change in Houston from a community oriented to crime specific strategy appears to have resulted in a substantial decrease in suppressible crime. But like the assessment of any police macro-strategy, there is ambiguity.

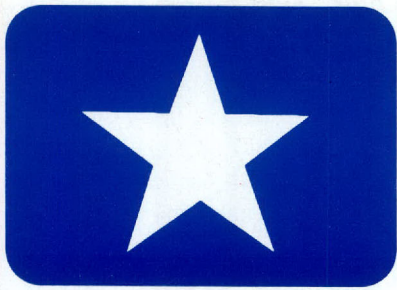
The most significant question is whether crime would have decreased anyway due to other trends or events. Data from the other five largest Texas cities also show a downward trend during the period—indeed a substantial downward trend. It should be noted that during this period, prison capacity in Texas grew enormously. (Table 1 may have

much more to do with incapacitation effect than police strategy—but that's another issue.) Further, the UCR national data indicate crime was decreasing. It is therefore likely that crime would have decreased in Houston without 655. Thus, the more refined question to ask is whether crime would have decreased as much in Houston if the additional personnel and change in strategy had not occurred.

We cannot, of course, provide a definitive answer to this question. But several points should be noted. First, the overall 30 months pre/post change is overwhelming. These figures cannot reasonably reflect broad social or demographic changes. Second, no change in reporting/recording practices appear to have occurred (indeed, if we are to accuse Houston of cooking the books in 1992, should we also accuse Fort Worth in 1993?). Third, the decrease in crime in Houston was much more precipitous immediately after January 1992 than in the comparison cities. The larger decreases in suppressible incidents occurred among the comparison cities in 1993. Arguably, crime may have already been driven so significantly lower in Houston in 1992 that the statewide and/or national trends affecting the comparison cities in 1993 would not have had the same impact in Houston, i.e., a 'nonsuppressible' base had already been achieved. Fourth, one must note the dramatic increase in Part II offense arrests. Clearly, more was occurring than placing 655 more officers on the street. The San Diego Field Interrogation Experiment documents the substantial effect aggressive patrol has on suppressible street crime. The linkage to increased Part II arrests in Houston is self-evident. Finally, the decrease in suppressible Part I offenses over the pre/post 30 month periods is substantially greater than the decrease in the comparison cities. One must think of the distinction between a 27.8% drop and a 20.7% drop not as a 7% difference, but as a 34% difference.

We feel compelled to note that this is not a commentary on the efficiency of policing strategy among the five comparison cities during the period. All of them had decreases in crime, and some of that decrease—we hope and we believe—was due to commendable police effort. If the pre 655 rate in Houston was artificially high, for whatever reason, then the percentage decrease is potentially more. The comparison cities are simply an urban Texas baseline and nothing more in terms of this bulletin.

As noted previously, four broad approaches to policing are competing for attention—the traditional or professional efficiency model, community policing, problem-oriented policing, and crime specific policing. Definitive answers regarding the relative efficacy of the approaches are not yet available. But documentation of the effects of efforts such as Houston's 655 program contributes considerable insight. 'Writing off' crime specific policing in favor of community oriented approaches is assuredly premature.



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Printed on recycled paper

TELEMASP Monthly Bulletins,  
ISSN 1075-3702, are produced  
under an agreement with the

**Police Research Center**  
Sam Houston State University  
Larry T. Hoover, Ph.D., Director  
Jamie L. Tillerson, Program Manager

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