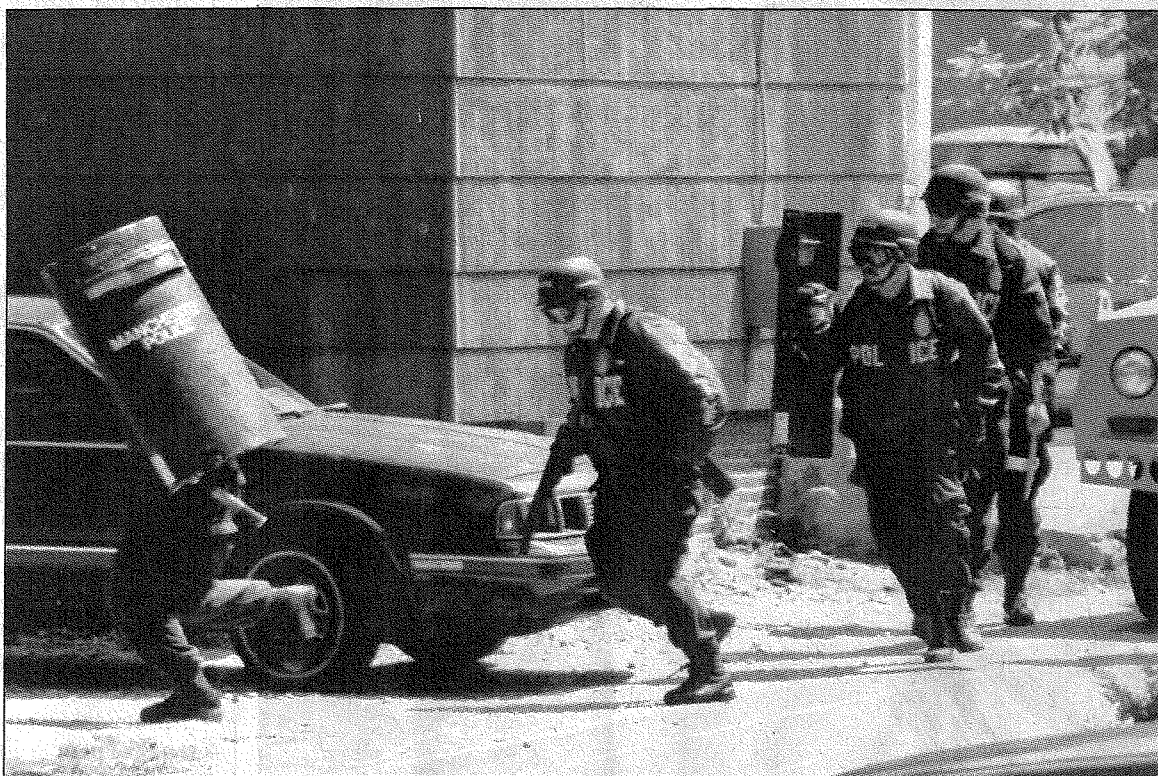


## Looking for a Clean Sweep



DICK MORIN/UNION LEADER FILE PHOTO

Manchester police execute a drug bust on June 6, 1995, as part of Operation Streetsweeper. As local police put the pressure on criminals, federal authorities pursued a parallel strategy, prosecuting drug offenders in federal court.

# Needed: New offensive to save city's Neighborhoods

◆**Turf war:** In 1995, the police, federal officials and neighbors successfully teamed up to fight crime. Can they do it again?

By **SHAWNE K. WICKHAM**

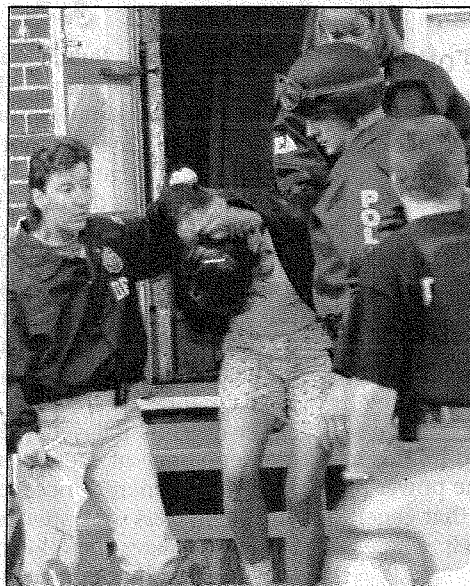
Sunday News Staff

**MANCHESTER** — More than a decade ago, police, prosecutors, housing advocates and neighbors launched a war on crime in the inner city with a clear, unified message: Not in my neighborhood. Not in this city.

It worked. For a while.

Those involved in the enforcement crackdown known as Operation Streetsweeper say the same concentration of resources and resolve could help clean up the city again. And some say taking back the neighborhoods — not just the Center City this time, but the West Side and other areas that have also seen spikes in violent crime — would be the best way to honor the sacrifice of Manchester Police Officer Michael Briggs, who was fatally shot last Monday, and buried Saturday.

Back in the mid-1990s, Manchester beat cops were reporting gangs of youths, mostly from Lawrence and Lowell, Mass.,



DICK MORIN/UNION LEADER FILE PHOTO

A woman hides her face in Manchester during a June 21, 1995, drug raid

were terrorizing the inner city, vying for control of the illicit drug trade.

"It was a turf war," recalled James Stewart, who retired four years ago as deputy chief of detectives. "They weren't permanent residents. They would hole up in someone's apartment."

Retired Deputy Police Chief Dale Robinson remembers a meeting with Stewart and then-Chief Peter Favreau after two shootings within a week in the summer of 1995. "We decided if they could stand on the corner, so could we."

So law enforcement responded in kind, focusing on the area bordered by Bridge and Valley, Elm and Maple streets. They sent out "gang cars," with federal, state, county and city officers all riding together. "And we just kept putting them out," Robinson said. "Anyplace the gang was, we were there to meet them."

Stewart said police made life miserable for the criminals. "You'd grab them, put them up against the wall, take their pictures and move on."

"How would you like to get stopped every night? How would you like to get frisked every night? They just went away, and things got better."

Meanwhile, federal authorities were pursuing a parallel strategy: Prosecuting drug offenders in federal court, which had the advantages of quicker prosecution, certainty of sentencing and more resources for rehabilitation and treatment, which can reduce recidivism, according to David Vicinanza, who was assistant U.S. attorney then.

"It really was an unprecedented example of federal, state and local cooperation," he recalled.

Sen. Judd Gregg was instrumental in getting federal funding for the project, support that continues to this day.

### Team effort

Vicinanzo recalled the U.S. Attorney's office also got the former Dime Savings Bank to make a multimillion-dollar donation to Manchester Neighborhood Housing Services as part of a settlement for mishandling mortgages. That money became seed money for neighborhood

## Lessons learned

**Operation Streetsweeper included:**

- **High-visibility police patrols, involving federal, state, county and local officers.**
- **Federal prosecution of drug offenses and other crimes.**
- **Pursuing forfeiture actions against apartments and houses where drug-dealing has occurred.**
- **Investment in housing, including low-interest loans to encourage homeownership.**
- **Neighborhood Watch and other anti-crime activities by residents.**

reinvestment, he recalled.

Vicinanzo credits the residents themselves with saving their neighborhoods. "They saw law enforcement at every level thinking enough of their neighborhoods to put that level of attention and resources into that project, and they felt empowered. They felt there was some hope and they responded."

Paul Gagnon, a former U.S. attorney, recalled in addition to the gang cars, police were conducting extensive undercover operations to apprehend street-level drug dealers.

"I think the crux of it all was that the people that were living in these communities were being victimized, and they wanted it to stop. And law enforcement assisted them in their efforts to make it stop. So it was a cooperative, synergistic effort that paid results."

Gagnon, who is now an immigration judge in Boston but still resides in Manchester, said what happened here a decade ago can happen again. "I think it starts with a simple proposition: You can't let the bad guys win. The good, decent people have a right to live in their community without being terrorized by people that would prey upon them."

"My experience in law enforcement has been that when law enforcement feels strongly that they're supported by the people that they are working for

and with, it helps them in their efforts," Gagnon said. "My feeling is that's the way to honor the sacrifice that this man (Officer Briggs) made. And I think that's what's going to happen."

Vicinanzo is convinced that kind of concerted effort is "absolutely essential" today.

He said some federal laws — notably the drug forfeiture laws — are even tougher now.

Taking a forfeiture action against an apartment house where a drug dealer operates, he said, "creates a great incentive for landlords to know exactly what's going on in their buildings."

"It's very powerful," he said.

### A different problem

It's not that there aren't anti-crime efforts going on today.

U.S. Attorney Thomas Colantuono said federal funds still come to New Hampshire for ongoing Operation Streetsweeper efforts, and Manchester still gets its share — more than \$200,000 a year. The city police department also recently launched targeted anti-gang patrols, he said.

In 1999, the Office of National Drug Control Policy designated Hillsborough County as a High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Area, bringing in even more federal funds for enforcement, demand reduction and drug treatment initiatives.

There are new programs such as Weed and Seed, and Project Safe Neighborhood. The community improvement committee launched by Manchester Neighborhood Housing Services in the 1990s has evolved into Neighbors for a Better Manchester.

But Stewart warned there are key differences in today's criminals and their activities.

Instead of roving gangs, many drug dealers have established permanent residency in the city. Meanwhile, he said, "You've got these absentee landlords who don't really care who the heck they're renting to."

Perhaps most daunting, the problem is no longer confined to the "tree street" neighborhoods, Stewart said. There have been shootings and robberies on the West Side, and most recently

off Wellington Road, places that used to be considered quiet sections of the city.

Stewart is blunt: "We need more cops."

He predicts an immediate response to the shooting of Officer Briggs, with officers pulling overtime shifts to patrol the streets for a while. But he said, "I just hope for the sake of the rest of the cops out there that someone's smart enough to figure out we need more cops. Do the Band-aid thing if you want for a while. But have a long-range plan. Have a pro-active police department."

"If someone said we're increasing taxes because we want to protect the citizens of Manchester, and make sure we're not going to close down schools in the middle of the day because some idiot's running around with a gun, you might be smart enough to go into a voting booth and vote for that guy," Stewart said.

### Prepare for battle

Vicinanzo said what's happening in Manchester is everyone's business. "To some degree, how Manchester goes will have a huge effect on how the whole state goes."

He remembers the warnings a decade ago from colleagues in comparably-sized cities such as Hartford and Bridgeport, Conn., who were dealing with similar problems of drugs and crime: They started their efforts too late. "There were neighborhoods they would never get back."

"Unless we're prepared to throw up our hands and say 'We quit, we're going to give up the state's largest city to the bad guys,' we better be prepared for a real battle to take back that city," said Vicinanza, who is now in private practice here and in Boston.

"I really honestly do believe it can be done. More importantly, it's got to be done."

"There's no virtue like necessity, and maybe Officer Briggs' death has really shown us that necessity. And probably the best way to honor him is to tackle the problems, and take back the city."