

Cooperative interagency approaches to the illegal drug problem

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ABSTRACT

Recent advances in law enforcement recognise that, increasingly, more types of crime have migrated across localities and even nations. Law enforcement requires the combined efforts of disparate agencies that must cooperate across organisational and jurisdictional boundaries. Nowhere is this trend more evident than in efforts to combat illegal drug trafficking. Recent efforts involve applying new communication and information technologies to assist the agencies to pool their talents and information in order to attack their common problems more efficiently and effectively. This paper is a case study of such a multi-agency alliance. It describes the two formative phases of the alliance: negotiation and commitment. The paper recounts several potential barriers to the formation of multi-agency alliances, including agency diversity, resource limitations and disincentives to collaboration. The paper also identifies critical factors for the successful formation of alliances, including common goals, facilitative structural mechanisms, broad participation and external support.

INTRODUCTION

Substance abuse has tremendous social and economic costs. On the social side, substance abuse creates an array of victims, threatens the social fabric of neighbourhoods and diminishes quality of life in communities. Economic impacts are in the billions of dollars, and include health care, treatment and lost productivity costs over and beyond the billions spent on the drug-related aspects of the criminal justice system at national, state and local levels (Krizay, 1986; Rice *et al.*, 1990). These costs occur directly from effects of illegal drug use on individuals, their families and their communities, as well as indirectly from the connections among drug use, crime and gang activities (Klein and Maxson, 1991).

The documented connection between

drug use and violent crime substantially increases the costs of substance abuse. Drug use by an individual increases the probability of violent behaviour (National Institute of Justice, 1993) because users often commit violent crimes to obtain money for purchasing drugs (Goldstein, 1985). Illustrative of the link between drugs and crime is the fact that the majority of violent offenders in US state prisons in 1986 reported that they were under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs at the time of the crime (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1992). Violence is also an integral part of drug distribution; it is used to enforce agreements, settle disputes, and punish transgressions. Between 24 per cent to 53 per cent of homicides in major US cities are drug related (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1992).

Two major approaches have been employed to overcome the problems associated with illegal drug use, neither of which has been independently successful. Over the last decade, the dominant response in the USA has been to constrict the supply through interdiction, thus exercising control over smuggling and sale of controlled substances. Since the passage of the 1988 Anti-Drug Abuse Act, more than US\$52bn has been spent on the drug effort, with the lion's share of these funds going to supply-side programmes (Office of National Drug Control Policy, 1994, p. 9). Despite this massive effort, supply-side controls have produced mixed results (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1992; National Institute of Justice, 1994). Even historically, efforts to constrict supply have sometimes had undesirable consequences, such as the gangland wars of the 1930s that arose from the attempted prohibition of alcoholic spirits in the USA.

Critics of this recent 'war on drugs' point to this historical experience as a demonstration of the futility of pursuing an exclusively supply-side strategy in drug

abatement efforts. These voices represent the 'root cause' school of thought, which holds that the key to narcotics control lies in the second approach: demand reduction efforts through treatment and education (Bugliosi, 1991). As historical evidence these critics often cite the cocaine epidemic that occurred during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in America. Consumption was greatly reduced by educating the populace about the dangers of using cocaine (Musto, 1989).

Recently, US law enforcement and criminal justice agencies have changed their focus and now argue that exclusive attention to either supply or demand reduction alone 'wages the wrong war' (Harris *et al.*, 1992). According to this view, the proper approach is to unite both supply and demand strategies in a single focus.

One type of ambitious effort towards integration of the supply and demand side has been the development of cooperative alliances across agencies. Law enforcement has long been hindered by inadequate communication and coordination among myriad local, state and national agencies involved in drug interdiction. Recent efforts apply new communication and information technologies to assist agencies in pooling their talents and information in order to attack their common problems more efficiently and effectively.

This paper describes the formation of such a pioneering cooperative multi-jurisdictional alliance. The alliance incorporates a highly advanced computer-supported information system that promises to deliver major benefits to the residents of a major metropolitan county, with significant potential to extend those benefits to citizens worldwide. Case study methods (Yin, 1989) are used to describe the two formative phases of the alliance. The paper also reviews interorganisational alliances and collective action literatures

to identify the potential barriers to alliance formation. The paper concludes by presenting a set of recommendations for effective communication and information sharing between providers of demand reduction services and law enforcement agencies towards the mutual goal of reducing illegal drug use and related crime.

BRIEF HISTORY AND OVERVIEW OF EL CENTRO

In 1991 a major metropolitan police chiefs' association (called the Chiefs and consisting of all chiefs of police and the sheriff) on the west coast of the USA identified two key problems impeding narcotics enforcement efforts. First, inadequate coordination across myriad local, state and national agencies had resulted in ineffective investigations and threatened directly the safety of law enforcement agents themselves (Meyers, 1995). Secondly, international drug cartels had invested vast resources in advanced information systems designed to keep dealers out of reach of technologically less advanced law enforcement agencies.

The Chiefs, with the assistance of state and national agencies, designed El Centro (a pseudonym), which contained an advanced computer-based information and collaborative work system intended to promote better coordination of narcotics enforcement efforts within and across jurisdictional boundaries. El Centro serves as a major node in larger state and national narcotics networks and provides a wide array of technologically sophisticated capabilities. Advanced system security is provided by biometric access, which permits entry to the system only on the basis of positive fingerprint identification. An intelligence database integrates information on suspects and crimes with assessments from

crime analysts to identify similar criminal patterns across different jurisdictions. A case management system provides officers with an integrated computer-based system that permits entry of all relevant information on criminal cases. Information on each case can be provided to the intelligence database for further analysis. The system also produces required, standardised reports with minimum effort. A photo-imaging capability enables officers to take photographs of suspects in the field and electronically transmit them to El Centro, where they can be electronically compared to those contained in the case management system and intelligence database. This often provides positive identification of suspects who are using aliases. Geographic mapping tools, such as geositional systems, enable officers to trace electronically the movements of suspects' vehicles without following them physically — or following at a great enough distance to avoid detection. Officers are also equipped with remote/mobile access that enables them to access El Centro databases from the field over secured, encrypted lines. Officers are also provided with integrated access links to a broad spectrum of public and government databases on high-speed data transmission (T1) lines. El Centro also monitors proximity of concurrent field operations on a real-time basis, and prevents the occurrence of potential conflicts.

El Centro has evolved and expanded considerably since its initial formation. This paper traces the trajectory of El Centro, highlighting the critical moments in its history. Case study methods (Yin, 1989) were used to collect data from the following information sources:

- documentation: memoranda, agendas, minutes of meetings, administrative documents

- archival records: service records, organisational records
- interviews: structured interviews with all chiefs, long interviews with key informants including the 'architects' of El Centro, informal interviews with relevant personnel
- direct observation: training sessions.

THE NEGOTIATION PHASE

The 'marketing coup'

In the summer of 1990, the police chiefs' association solicited proposal ideas from its members for a regional or countywide programme eligible for funding from a national agency. Representatives of the association who served on a grant committee task force distributed a questionnaire to all county chiefs in order to assess their departmental needs. The association's grant committee reviewed the questionnaire responses in order to formulate a general purpose statement. Based on the survey results the committee recommended that the chiefs seek funding for a countywide unit for the purpose of information sharing. The initial mission statement read:

'To collect and integrate information/intelligence from law enforcement agencies, as well as other sources. To analyze and disseminate that data in an effort to identify and reduce drug trafficking in the county.' (From an official police committee report, 1990.)

One of the grant committee members and major 'architect' of El Centro referred to the polling of chiefs as a 'marketing coup'. In his rich narration of El Centro's history he drew an analogy between business operations and law enforcement operations, and presented the survey as a tool

in a marketing strategy 'to get the chiefs to agree to move in an arena where each one could get something out'. Admittedly, the survey was 'highly biased' to produce responses that, in one way or the other, expressed a need for access to a sophisticated information system. Its purpose, however, was not only to assess chiefs' needs but also to reveal those objectives that were the most salient to all chiefs. The objectives served as the 'selling points' of the proposed project.

The grant committee's first progress report listed eight objectives for the proposed programme:

- identification of drug-trafficking networks
- officer safety
- resource maximisation
- expansion of existing databases
- creation of an investigative equipment resource pool
- equitable distribution of asset forfeiture/seizure proceeds
- expansion of services and greater accessibility to these services
- timely intelligence information from criminal analysis.

Of these eight objectives the one that has been used to promote the programme most vigorously and with the best results has been officer safety. In the authors' interviews with all county chiefs, increased safety for police officers was overwhelmingly rated as the most important service offered by El Centro.

Another conscious marketing decision concerned the allocation of funds. The two options available were either 'distributing the money in many pots' or creating one common resource pool by granting the total amount to the police chiefs' association. The latter option was chosen because it was believed that it would produce a high degree of agree-

ment and willingness for cooperation among the majority of county police departments. As one chief reported:

'Many departments are too small to dedicate resources to get information. [We need] collective resources to tap into information. It is more cost efficient.'

'Giving voice' to small departments

The police chiefs' association provided the forum in which the idea of El Centro was conceived, promoted and eventually realised. Historically, the largest police department in the county has been dominant in terms of political and financial power. The chiefs' association was formed approximately a decade ago as a reaction to the one-department dominance in order 'to give voice' to the smaller departments in the county. Attendance at the association meetings consists largely of the smaller departments, evidence to the fact that the small departments need it the most. Large departments rarely participate unless the issues on the agenda affect them directly.

The association has been described also as a 'support group' for the county chiefs. According to one informant, chiefs of police identify themselves as a unique population. Feelings of isolation result from being at the top of their organisation and perceiving colleagues from within the organisation as 'wanting your job'. The association brings together chiefs who face similar problems and deal with similar issues at work.

The chiefs' association facilitated the formation of El Centro mainly in three ways. First, it precipitated the coordination of the numerous police departments in the county. Secondly, as mentioned above, El Centro was conceived as a contribution to a common cause. The

chiefs wanted to create a collective resource pool instead of further expanding fragmentation. The association without exception represented all police chiefs and, therefore, was the appropriate platform for creating a collective resource pool. Thirdly, the association had a more powerful voice representing the chiefs in outside organisations, such as funding agencies, than any single chief.

'Politics' and opposition – 'Marketing' and competition

Opposition/competition from within

Prior to the formation of El Centro, narcotics intelligence networks in the county were not well integrated. The two most frequently used databases presented several operating and service limitations that El Centro promised to overcome. First, neither organisation provided enhanced intelligence services such as county-level criminal analysis. Secondly, neither organisation collected information other than subject identification characteristics. Thirdly, both organisations had limited working schedules and were not operating during hours when narcotics information was most needed (such as late evenings). Fourthly, exchange of information on both systems was slow and cumbersome. Fifthly, membership rules for one of the two main databases were ambiguous, and access to that system was highly restricted.

One of the two main existing information systems supported the El Centro project, but the other opposed it. The supporting agency saw El Centro as an expansion of its own services. In the autumn of 1990, while the grant committee was investigating several options for the project, the grant committee and representatives of the supporting agency met to discuss the feasibility of integrating and expanding their services.

Interestingly enough, opposition was raised by the dominant police department, which had an information system (hereafter called Narco) operating under its auspices. Narco was formed in the 1970s under the initiative of the assistant chief at the time. Initially, the assistant chief had invited other large narcotics units to participate in the effort. Upon their decline the dominant police department proceeded by itself to create Narco. Since its formation Narco remained under the flag of the dominant police department. Administrative documents and interviews provide evidence to the fact that access to Narco was difficult, ineffective, inefficient, and 'most often accomplished through personal relationships'. Despite its bugs, however, Narco was highly regarded and respected for its intelligence service.

The majority of the chiefs described Narco as the dominant department's tool to increase its power base. Frequent references also were made to 'large egos', 'political turf interests', and 'claim jumping'. One chief reported:

'[El Centro] is better than what we had. [Before we] only had the Narco system [which was] PC-based, political, just some software. Everyone was out there gunning for themselves. Narcotics [is] a cowboy operation. I thought Narco was a method to further corruption, [and] asset forfeiture politics. [Someone would] call in a case to Narco with potential big payoff, and they'd say, "oh, that's our case ... and by the way, where is that guy?" Whoever controls information controls the day. El Centro has more control over what information is whose and how information is disseminated. [It is] controlled by a group of people with common interests. Leadership and cooperation are keys.'

Another chief reported that El Centro was 'partially a reaction to [the dominant police department] for not giving enough credit' for the successful resolution of investigative cases. Generally, it was perceived as very important to 'dislodge Narco from the dominant police department'. El Centro was expected to 'bring agencies together on a level playing field', and 'break political boundaries'.

Narco opposed the El Centro proposal on grounds that El Centro was a wasteful duplication of its own services and unnecessary competition for future funding. It resisted its merger with El Centro and tried actively to prevent El Centro's formation.

In the winter of 1991, the two chiefs who were the primary 'architects' of the new system presented an overview of the project at the chiefs' association meeting. The proposal was scheduled to go under grant review in the spring. In March, the Narco executive council sent a letter to the funding agency that was considering funding for the El Centro project and claimed that the implementation of the project would partially duplicate and potentially undermine the objectives and operations of Narco.

Competition from outside

While the concept of El Centro was being developed at the county level, a similar project was under development at the national level. Fears and concerns about duplication were raised; those concerns were easily allayed with the assurance that the target of the El Centro project would remain at the county level and would not interfere with the mission of the national agency's efforts. Eventually, the El Centro project gained the support of the national agency and became a participant in the agency's mission.

THE COMMITMENT PHASE

A 'neutral non-law-enforcement site'

Prior to the submission of the proposal to the funding agency, the chiefs' grant committee received concurrence from all other police departments that they would not file separate applications. Concurrence was critical to the successful acceptance of the proposal, especially given the opposition from Narco and the dominant police department.

To pacify chiefs' concerns that the new system would not create 'a new empire' in the county El Centro was designed as a supra-agency that would disregard political interests and turf battles. To this effect, the composition of the executive board was designed to reflect broad representation and a high degree of autonomy from parochial interests. Representation was decided based on geography, population demographics, agency membership, size of police department and size of narcotics unit. The choice of a 'neutral, non-law-enforcement site' was deemed necessary. To ensure that political interests would not emerge and cooperation would not be jeopardised by other incentives, it was also decided that El Centro would not share in asset forfeiture. Finally, in order to enhance equity, strict rules and sanctions were imposed for participating departments that would break membership rules. The grant proposal came up for voting at the chiefs' association meeting and was unanimously accepted. No department voted against the proposal, including the dominant department that had previously opposed it.

THE IMPLEMENTATION PHASE

The original concept proposal designed by the chiefs' grant committee evolved into a proposal for a technologically sophisticated, highly automated system.

The revised mission statement read:

'The mission of El Centro is to produce and provide intelligence products, enhanced information sharing, and advanced systems technology to local, state, and federal [national] law enforcement agencies in order to ensure officer safety and enhance operational efficiency and effectiveness.'

The first phase of the proposed project received funding in late spring of 1991, and thus the El Centro agency was formed. The main objective of the first phase was to develop and implement a deconfliction unit operating on an around-the-clock basis. Other objectives included preliminary work for the creation and implementation of a mapping system, and extensive 'marketing' of the El Centro concept to law enforcement agencies and departments. Funding for the subsequent phases remained uncertain, although El Centro advocates firmly believed that in the absence of national funds, financial support would come eventually from the 'customers' of El Centro's services.

In its subsequent phases the project received a series of grants from various agencies. El Centro expanded to additional counties and grew in operational capabilities. Progressively, it augmented its database by becoming consolidated with a number of related databases, including Narco. This consolidation with Narco represented a major contribution towards the success of the collective effort on the part of the dominant department. As one highly placed official of that city put it, 'We're taking a big chance here.' They knew Narco was working and narcotics crime is a big priority for them. What would happen to Narco's functionality when it was merged with El Centro?

EL CENTRO 'HITS A PLATEAU'

El Centro is currently facing a number of technological and administrative problems. Due to the sheer magnitude of the project and the complexity of its technological system it appears that certain expensive investments in security devices were miscalculated. Recurring hardware and software problems have also delayed the full implementation and operation of the system. The recent resignation of the programme manager and systems analyst of El Centro raises further concerns about the future of the project. The newly hired programme manager has admitted that inflated promises have been made about the capabilities of this system. Similar statements have been made by one of the two primary 'architects' of the project. In his words, El Centro:

'has hit a plateau. They need to admit their mistakes ... to review decisions in the context they were made in. ... Let's rest. Stop trying to anticipate the changes. ... It needs to take a deep breath. ... We need to market what's there. Slow down growth. Once we decide what it is, what it looks like, then we make it user-friendly.'

The human interface has been criticised for its complexity. System sophistication has led to increased requirements being imposed on end-users. As a result, while the system was initially designed for narcotics officers, now it seems that dedicated personnel are needed to utilise it effectively. One chief reports: 'We have misidentified the users. The stuff now is user-friendly to crime analysts but not to real cops. ... We take good care of our external customers but we ignore our internal customers.'

Retrospectively, the decision to target narcotics operations has also been recon-

sidered. 'If there was a list of users, narcs would be there at the bottom of the list. Narcs are distrusting, one-liners. They are convinced that "a little mistake will kill me". They don't want to change ... "If I can access it, some smart 12-year-old can".'

With hardware and software debugging being delayed training has not produced the desired results either. The limited number of training sessions that have taken place have been disorganised and confusing. Recently, action was taken to resolve a number of these problems.

The greatest challenge for El Centro, however, waits in the future. The success of the project will depend on the extent to which narcotics officers use it for information sharing. Incentives against the sharing of information across jurisdictions result from asset forfeiture law. Asset forfeiture is the legal seizure by law enforcement agencies of any assets used in illegal drug activity. In times of tight budgets for law enforcement, asset forfeiture moneys provide an opportunity to supplement lean resources. Ironically, information shared with another agency might assist that other agency in making the arrest — and thus obtaining the asset forfeiture moneys — or it might lead to a division of the seized assets among participating agencies.

THEORETICAL EXPLANATIONS OF EL CENTRO AS A COLLABORATIVE WORK SYSTEM

The collaborative nature of El Centro presents a unique opportunity to study the formation and development of interorganisational cooperative relationships. The literature identifies a wide range of interorganisational forms including research consortia, joint ventures and programmes, strategic alliances, interlocking directorates and federations (Kogut,

1988). El Centro is a mixed form that is best described as a 'participatory federation' (Flanagan, 1996). A participatory federation occurs when a number of organisations create a coordinative agency to pursue some common goal (Provan, 1983); 'this central agency owes its existence to and acts on behalf of participating organisations' (Flanagan, 1996, p. 8). An independent federation differs from a participatory federation in that the coordinative agency is autonomous from the participating organisations.

Interorganisational relationships in general, and participatory federations in specific, evolve in three stages in a cyclical manner: negotiation, commitment, and renegotiation (Ring and Van de Ven, 1994; see also Benassi, 1993; Zajac and Olsen, 1993). This paper has described mainly the negotiation and commitment phases of the cooperative relation. The following section discusses the obstacles that interorganisational efforts need to overcome in order to become realised as participatory federations. Barriers to and critical success factors for collaboration are summarised in Table 1.

BARRIERS AND SUCCESS FACTORS FOR THE FORMATION OF INTERORGANISATIONAL RELATIONS

One key roadblock to integrated information-based alliances is the sheer number of agencies whose efforts must be coordinated. In the county under examination, more than 50 different local, state and national agencies have jurisdiction and maintain drug enforcement efforts. Each agency had maintained its own database for years, with unique hardware, software, reporting requirements, etc. It was not until recently, after several years of concerted effort and millions of dollars of national funding, that El Centro

Table 1: Barriers and critical success factors to negotiation and commitment

Barriers

Agency diversity:

- Sheer number of agencies to be coordinated
- Unequal distribution of information, resources and power across agencies
- Unequal narcotics crime rates across communities

Resource limitations:

- Substantial funding requirements well beyond the capabilities of local police departments

Disincentives to collaboration:

- Potential disincentives to cooperation from asset forfeiture law
- Existence of competing systems in powerful agencies
- Sensitivity and confidentiality of narcotics operations
- 'Turf issues' across state, federal and local agencies that lacked a substantial history of collaboration

Critical success factors

Identified common needs:

- Significant common goal: officer safety
- High levels of proximity and interdependence among local agencies

Structural mechanisms:

- Existence of a coordinating body of CEOs: The Chiefs' Association
- Federated structure of El Centro, to avoid a 'new empire'
- El Centro placed outside any single agency
- Vision of El Centro as a node in a larger statewide effort

Processes:

- Involvement of CEOs from local agencies
- Existence of a few key champions of the idea
- Broad participation of all agencies in the early stage
- Early needs assessment among the participants
- Involvement of key state and federal agencies
- Political effectiveness of champions at state and federal level

External support:

- Federal and state administrations that favoured 'supply-side' efforts
- Availability of substantial grant funding
- Experience of champions in obtaining grants in the past
- Regional coalition increased the probability of receiving large grants
- Support from some existing information networks

was designed as a shared information base across these numerous drug enforcement agencies. By itself, the logistical problem of integrating the efforts of a vast number of organisations is substantial. To overcome this problem, a coordinating mechanism should already be in place. In the El Centro case, the coordinating mechanism was the police chiefs' association. As mentioned in a previous section of this paper, the chiefs' association facilitated the formation by providing

a forum where the negotiation process could take place.

Another obstacle to the formation of broad-based federations that results from the sheer number of participating organisations is diversity. Participants across organisations lack shared organisational visions, goals, reward systems, cultures, and other unifying mechanisms that might induce cooperation (Badaracco, 1991). In narcotics enforcement the primary bonds that tie the disparate organisations to-

gether are a common determination to stop the narcotics trade and to arrest offenders, as well as shared values for law enforcement as a community. Indeed, although not an official policy, the separate organisations may functionally reward agents for non-cooperation with other agencies. The advocates of the El Centro project were successful in promoting the idea and gaining almost unanimous support by highlighting the one objective that was the most salient to all chiefs: officer safety. Similarly, interorganisational cooperative efforts should be based on objectives that are meaningful and important to all participants.

A third barrier to interorganisational relations is opposition that may arise from within the group of potential participants. El Centro faced opposition predominantly from one powerful police department and the agency that supported its information system. Opposition from these organisations was not surprising because El Centro was partly formed as a counteraction to those organisations' dominance. In this sense, El Centro falls under the category of a defensive alliance (Benassi, 1993). Cooperation among the chiefs was organised to minimise their dependence on a single agency. Three strategies were employed to ensure the successful formation of the defensive alliance: (i) unanimous support from the chiefs' association, (ii) cooptation of the opposing organisation (Galaskiewicz, 1985; Selznick, 1949), and (iii) equal membership rights and equity for all participants in the federation.

Short-term self-interests pose a fourth obstacle to the successful implementation of information-based alliances. A critical theoretical issue to law enforcement is how officers can be induced to share information that is important to the larger collective effort. El Centro presents what Connolly and Thorn (1990) call a discre-

tionary database, 'a shared pool of data to which several participants ... may, if they choose, separately contribute information' (p. 221). A goal of such databases is achieving a critical mass of useful and timely information. The key problem is that the pay-off function for individual contributors rewards withholding rather than contributing information. Specifically, in the absence of countervailing incentives, most individuals would prefer to avoid the costs of contributing information while benefiting from the information contributed by others. This is the 'free-rider' problem (Sweeney, 1973), which is the dilemma encountered in securing individual contributions to the provision of public goods (Hardin, 1982). The situation in narcotics enforcement is more complex than existing formulations of information-related public goods theories. One important exegesis of these complexities is asset forfeiture law.

El Centro has not reached that point in its development where it has to face the challenge of overcoming short-term self-interests. Plans to anticipate it, however, were made early on in El Centro's implementation with the active promotion of the concept of information sharing. If the cooperative effort is truly successful, the number of arrests and the value of assets seized should grow dramatically. Thus, even though a participating agency must share assets seized, the total volume of assets to be shared should be greater. Consequently, agencies stand to benefit financially from more arrests and convictions that produce a larger pool of assets to be shared, even though their percentage of the money may be smaller than if they had acted alone but consequently made fewer arrests and obtained fewer convictions. The success of such an approach depends on the willingness of agencies to forgo self-interest in the short term by sharing information that

may lead to shared asset forfeiture returns for any particular conviction.

CONCLUSIONS

Multi-agency cooperation offers the potential for substantial benefits in law enforcement. Efforts to control the importation, distribution and sale of illegal narcotics have been severely hampered by the lack of cooperation across national, state and local levels of the criminal justice community (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1992). This fragmentation of efforts, and occasional conflicts over jurisdiction, add to the already serious concern that organised illegal drug networks are making significant inroads with the support of advanced information and communication technology. Multi-jurisdictional alliances among anti-drug organisations can offer significant advantages to traditional approaches (Chaiken *et al.*, 1990). Advanced communication and information systems provide a platform for information sharing that can support collective action and can match the sophistication of the drug cartels. The key is to induce criminal justice organisations to work together and share information (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1992).

This paper has described the formation of such a cooperative multi-jurisdictional alliance. The alliance incorporates a highly advanced computer-supported information system that promises to deliver major benefits to the residents of a major metropolitan county, with significant potential to extend those benefits to citizens worldwide. The paper reviewed interorganisational alliances and collective action literatures to identify the potential barriers to alliance formation, and concluded by presenting a set of recommendations for the successful formation of cooperative alliances among

law enforcement agencies towards the mutual goal of reducing illegal drug use and related crime.

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