

**Interview with Steve Vuylsteke, Sergeant with Hillsboro Police Department****Interviewer: Sophia Tran      May, 2005**

Sophia Tran: We are doing a project at Century to describe and analyze the changes and trends in crime and law enforcement from 1980 to 2005.

Steve Vuylsteke: Okay

ST: So, how long have you been involved in your department?

Vuylsteke: Since 1983; 22 years.

ST: And what are some of the most drastic changes you've seen in crimes over the past 25 years?

Vuylsteke: I would say the changes involved in crimes were that it was more of a property-based, in other words, thefts back then would be, "I'm going to burglarize your place and take your TV and take your stereo," whereas today, it is more of a paper-based. It is tougher to steal, sell or fence property-related items. That's a difficult task compared to getting into checks and forging checks, having credit card numbers, obtaining property money through credit card numbers. So you're looking at identity theft which didn't exist back then, whereas it is now more prominent because it is an easy way to get money, just by purporting it through something else. Everything else stays consistent in terms of assault, family disturbances, etc. With population on increase, you see more DUI's related things, traffic related things, only because there is more population. I don't think that the crimes actually increase, just the number of people have increased.

ST: So, what have the police done to adapt to these changes?

Vuylsteke: As technology evolves, we have to evolve with the technology. You see more computer-related stuff; computers probably didn't exist back then (laughs), or not to the degree that it is today. So, we have to be better-trained on how to detect forged documents and how to find online fraud that has been happening over the computer. Search warrants have to be evolved where you can actually take somebody's computer now. At forensics, after you have the computer on how to get into it, they find the information on the check related stuff or internet related stuff. So you have to be more scientific in computer-based.

Alice Zhang: Some police officers say that technology helps police, while some are saying that technology is making it worse and harder for police.

Vuylsteke: Ah...this is where the interesting part comes in. I can look up in the computer for your name and find your driver's license photo, I can find any jail photos. I can find all kinds of information about the people I'm looking for. I can find people you've hung out with. So it's amazing, I can find people so much easier today because of that. We can send jail photos in our cars now... So technology has helped to the degree where I can

find people easier, I can identify people easier, I know who their associates are, etc. Even cellular phones... we didn't have back then and now you can make a phone call and find out all the information you can possibly need. So information can be gathered more quickly; it has been a tremendous help.

Now technology has been a tremendous hindrance as well because there are counter surveillance techniques. (Sets an example) I can put up cameras in my house and see the cops coming. I can do the frauds because of printers and even how good the paper has been improved, where I can forge things on paper. Again, the online fraud that you can do from the computers. So it has been a blessing, yet a hindrance. (Jokes) It is bitter sweet. It has helped us a lot and it has *produced* different crime.

ST: So is there an area in Hillsboro that sees the most crime activity?

Vuylsteke: I'd say different areas change as different trends develop. In other words, if a person moves into a specific area, and he likes doing car problems, we'll notice that that areas has increased in activity until we can find out who's doing it... Also, it's seasonal as well. If you look at the Tanasbourne area, the criminal activity occurs around December [because] Christmas is coming. A lot of shoppers have a lot of cars that get ripped off. A lot of stores have thefts because of the large volume of people. So I can't point to one area and say there's great criminal activity here because it changes. It's so cyclical with seasons and with the people living there over time. You know, sometimes we'll see a lot of activity along the MAX tracks because a certain group is coming in and doing something along the stations of the MAX. But when that doesn't happen we see a *decrease* there. We really have to stay on top of current trends, and we get information every week which shows different areas of the city and how popular it is. So we kind of chase it around as it happens.

AZ: So, what would you say are the changes in the tactics the police have used to catch criminals?

Vuylsteke: Several things. First of all, you have people like me. Notice that I'm not wearing a uniform today. My group doesn't. Some days we'll wear uniforms, some days we won't, just to be able see what is going on. We use surveillance cameras. It's been a huge impact for us. Surveillance cameras on the MAX trains...we've solved so many crimes by just watching the surveillance tapes and we can see who was involved in it. Video cameras [have been] a tremendous aid for us. Actually, the thing that stayed the same in solving crimes have been dogs. We've been using dogs since the late 70's. That's something that has never changed and we're still actually using dogs in the same way as we did back then today...training them in the same manner and everything. So that's something that's stayed relatively the same.

Deterrent techniques...I don't know if you've seen the phantom cars...

AZ: Oh there's just like a car with no police officer?

Vuylsteke: Exactly. We have even taken pictures of motor officers and made a life-size motor officer and set that inside the car. (laughs) It slows people down. It's certainly an

innovative technique. So we've kind of evolved with the times to try new things. But it usually comes from just being out there and watching.

ST: Do you think that what the police are doing is effective?

Vuylsteke: Yes. We do change things up once in a while. We just started the Street Crimes Unit, so we do a lot of surveillance type stuff but it takes a lot of people. It's person-intensive. When we're short on patrol, it's hard to take people and have them focus on specific areas. Other things that have been extremely successful is our bicycle team...to be able to ride up and cars are very limited to where they can go. It's a lot easier when officers ride up on bicycles [because] at night it's easier to get around in different areas and see what's going on. Those have been very effective. The phantom car has been extremely effective. It slows people down and takes care of criminal activity in a certain area. A lot of people see that it's a car and either slow down [or] not do what they were going to do. The other things that we have been effective is communication with people within the city. That's definitely improved over the years...where people are more apt to call in. Neighborhood watch things have improved...people are watching better on what's going on in their neighborhood and reporting to us. We arrest a lot of drunk drivers by people calling in and following them till we get there. So communication has definitely evolved over the years and [has] been a big improvement on our job. I'd say it's definitely helped us. Our city is getting a lot bigger, so it turns out that we need to keep people involved. And we have a lot of other things that have improved in terms of people that work on reporting crimes. It doesn't need a cop anymore. We've gone to patrol service specialists which frees up cops to do some of the other things where they go out and actually take criminal reports, work on crime prevention techniques. They really help us on our jobs so we don't need as many cops because we have them helping us as well.

ST: What crime has been committed the most and has that changed in the past 25 years?

Vuylsteke: Again, fraud.

ST: Fraud?

Vuylsteke: Fraud, definitely, definitely. The other crimes that we see a lot of are of course, we see a lot of driving things. DUI's especially at night—well, of course at nighttime, but it's still out there, it's prominent. I wouldn't say I've seen a big increase in any of violent crimes based on per-cap that yeah, we've got more people now, so we may have more reported today than we did 25 years ago, when the city was about oh...25,000 and we're 80,000 now. I haven't seen any difference in terms of the amount of assaults that are happening...robberies that are happening. Domestic violence, there's another thing we respond to an awful lot, but we always have. The only thing that I've really seen increase would be you know, fraud-related type activities because it's the crime of the day...as well as methamphetamine. They kinda go hand-in-hand. When I got into this job, we didn't see methamphetamine. It just didn't exist. The drug of choice back then was cocaine; we used to see cocaine all the time. I can't tell the last time I've seen cocaine. It's all methamphetamine. So that's definitely changed. The drug of choice now,

where it used to see the coke. You still see marijuana, still as much then as I see today. But in terms of the other drugs, I don't see coke much; I see meth a lot. And the fraud has increased because it deals with money to buy methamphetamine. So that is what really we see right now, is theft, fraud, and drug use. That takes up a lot of our time.

ST: So, [do] you really think that meth is a huge problem, or is it the media that is causing all the hype?

Vuylsteke: I think that we found out a while ago that it was a huge problem, and the media is starting to jump on it. I kinda laugh about it now too cause I'll see it on TV, I'll see, 'Oh METH WATCH,' and 'meth this' and 'meth that.' And I'll kinda laugh because well, we figured it out a while ago, but now the media's kind of getting into it and saying, 'Oh we're going to have viewers by watching the tragedy of meth.' We found out years ago, that everything we tend to be around now—fraud, meth—go hand-in-hand. So we developed drug teams. The drug teams have been around for several years, it's just that they focus now on the meth, which a couple years back, they developed a fraud team. So they noticed that those two are working hand-in-hand now and I'd say that we've seen it and gotten on it several years back, whereas the media now is going, 'Oh hey, this is an epidemic.' Well, we figured it out a long time ago, so yea, I don't think it's something they're pushing. I think that we knew it and they're jumping on the bandwagon now.

AZ: So what have the police done to deal with the meth problem?

Vuylsteke: Again, we're looking at the team that we've got that works in this county. I don't know how many officers are assigned to it, but they have officers from Washington County, Hillsboro, Beaverton, Sherwood...it's a big effort from county agencies that just constantly work the drugs. They'll find one, wrap it up, and move on to another house or another person. We are just constantly looking at people who are involved in drug trafficking. The intelligence...we can communicate better with other counties as well to talk about who's doing the problems cause it doesn't stop at county lines or city lines. You know, Portland people can come out here and either sell or buy, and our people go in there and sell and buy. And we see some stuff out of other states, out of other countries...marijuana coming down from Canada. So, communication between these other agencies is very important. Like supply routes to take care of. A lot of intelligence gathering on that. So that's what we pretty much do, just constantly gathering intelligence, write search warrants, serve the search warrants, find massive quantities of dope inside. (Talks about a search he was involved in the day before; said that he found meth and heroin). You don't see too much of that (heroin) anymore, but occasionally you do. So it's just about working the problem, serving the search warrants, getting the stuff off of the streets.

AZ: So is it hard to work with such a big group of police officers from all different counties, because everyone kind of wants to do it their own way?

Vuylsteke: Yeah, that is a unique problem. And it's been nice with our particular unit. We'll have all these people from municipalities, as well as the county, but they work a

sergeant from Hillsboro is assigned to it, and a sergeant from county is assigned to it. So they kind of keep the ball moving in the direction they need to. So it could get tough to supervise a group of people like that cause you know (sets example) if I'm from Sherwood, then I'm going to want you to address the problem in Sherwood. But I'm from county and we need this problem out in county (example ends). They've no problem with it because it's been in effect for so long that it's nice to have representation on the supervisory level for different agencies so it kind of keeps them moving, so they know that they have to address a problem in this city and that city. They keep it pretty well balanced. It *could* cause a problem, but so far, it really hasn't. And the agency has it's head up on it so well knowing, 'Yeah, we don't serve up too many warrants in Beaverton, but I know you're addressing the problem because you're hitting these houses that are just on the outskirts of Beaverton,' for example. So they know that the problem is holistic and they're addressing it. Maybe they're not addressing it within the city limits, but it does have an effect, not matter where they're serving.

ST: So, what type of changes have you seen in gang activity from then until now?

Vuylsteke: Gang activity? It's interesting that you bring that one up, because I was just having a discussion before you came in here with another sergeant, and we've got a fair degree on gang activity going on in town right now. I see the graffiti, I see certain people. I pretty much know who the gang members are [because] I see them walk around town. And there are some fights between rival gangs. That was definitely on the increase, *however*, back when I was first around here, it was a big problem too. But we knew who the people were, we were dealing with them. Most of them got arrested or have current warrants and have fled the country. And then the gang activity fell down because we put so much pressure and effort into it. Well, that problem left, and we moved on to other problems. And now the gang problem is kind of starting to rise again. They see it (Hillsboro) as a place where they can hang out and do their stuff. Well now, we hope that after the several arrests that we made last week, and the ones that we continue to do, that the problems will fall off again. So it was very tired in town for several years. So it's kind of interesting that if you put you efforts onto, the problem decreases, and then as you move to different areas, then the problem increases. So we've seen an increase on it, but it's been the same when I started working here. (laughs)

AZ: So has the age range changed, like back then, or...?

Vuylsteke: Definitely not. You see the same. The people we were dealing with back then were 15-20. It seems like 15 is about the time you get started. I mean, I haven't seen any statistics on it, but it's just what I'm seeing. You know, you're about 15 or so, you get involved in it, and then you're still involved in it at 20, but a lot of people go to prison, mellowing out of it or something. But it seems like that age range is still the age range I'm dealing with today. Yeah, you get the people in their 30's (laughs). You always do. But it seems like it's more attractive to the 15-20 age range.

ST: So the things that they (the gangs) are doing, has that changed?

Vuylsteke: I'd say to some degree. I'd say that the drug activity is a little more prominent these days than it was. It seemed like, when I was first here, there was a lot of fighting going on with weapons and all, drinking—alcohol seems to be involved in a lot of it—it seems like there's now drug-related stuff today, in terms of the more designer drugs such as meth, whereas I didn't see too much drug activity then. Maybe a little bit of marijuana. Graffiti was an issue back then, but not to the degree in which it is today. You'd see occasional tagging, but I see more today than I did back then.

ST: So what is the police department doing to balance the focus and control gang activity consistently?

Vuylsteke: Yeah, it comes down to personnel and funding again. It's an interesting issue that we have to deal with. When we have good times, when we have a lot of money and cops, we have groups and keep focus on