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## What is the new EPD Street Crimes Unit?

Gina Scalpone Apr 26, 2019



Eugene Police Department (Sarah Northrop/Emerald)

Sarah Northrop

Although the Eugene Police Department's Street Crimes Unit just launched a month ago, they have already participated in two human trafficking stings, arrested multiple alleged child sex offenders and seized \$40,000 in a drug bust, according to press releases from the EPD.

Just this week, the unit took least 10 people into custody, mostly on drug crimes.

Last week, the new Eugene Police Street Crimes Unit arrested three people on a variety of drug offenses and warrants in East Campus, all from one online tip.

"We're going to have them focus on all kind of street level crimes," said EPD Chief Chris Skinner in

a video released to media by EPD in March. "There will be a component of this team will be taking a look at drug use in our community and trying to do some things about that, out property crimes, whether it be petty theft, and all the way up to some of our violent crimes that we see."

The Street Crimes Unit was developed to fill in a gap in policing coverage, Lt. Scott Vinje of Street Crimes Unit said. He said that while the Eugene population grows, EPD's staffing hasn't increased much.

According to the City of Eugene's website, 911 calls to the EPD have increased 21 percent in the last five years, and EPD doesn't respond to one in three calls due to lack of staff.

The Street Crimes Unit is financed by one-time bridge funding for public safety and prevention services from the Eugene City Council reserve funds to address budget gaps. Passed in December 2018, the grant provided \$8.6 million for 18 months of funding for the Street Crimes Unit, as well as programs like the Eugene Municipal Community Court and adding new 911 service operators.

"With Street Crimes not being tied to patrol and answering calls for service," said Skinner, "it gives us an opportunity to have a dedicated workforce that can go out and solve these problems in these neighborhoods."

Vinje said the Street Crimes Unit is using intelligence-led policing. "It's a focused approach," Vinje said.

The officers use the police database to identify the worst offenders they want to target and scour their social media pages to learn more about them.

They also take complaints from the community, and so far, they take any complaint that's brought to them. "What's driving us crazy today?" Vinje said.

Right now, Vinje said the goal is to focus on bigger offenders to allow patrol officers the ability to be in the community more.

Vinje is still in the process of narrowing their focus, defining the term "street crimes" and creating a standard operating procedure for everyone to follow.

Vinje said the Eugene community has responded well. "People are starting to recognize us," he said.

The message may not have made it to the University of Oregon campus yet though. UO student Isabelle Cullen, 20, said she hadn't heard of the Street Crimes Unit but based on the name, she thought it was "the outdoor version of RAs"—dealing with drug and alcohol offenses off-campus.

"I guess I just don't know what the prevalence of those crimes are in Eugene," Cullen said when she learned about the kinds of operations the Street Crimes Unit had run so far, adding that she imagined they were bigger problems in Eugene as a whole than on the UO campus.

Funding for the Street Crimes Unit is temporary; the bridge fund expires in June 2020. The city of Eugene has proposed a 0.28 percent payroll tax to raise the \$22.8 million to continue all the services the bridge funded.

"I hope we get more money," said Vinje.

In addition to Vinje, the Street Crimes Unit has four officers and a sergeant right now, but the city council bridge funding budgeted for 10 new officers. Skinner said the team was built with existing staff, and the funding instead covered new patrol officers.

When the unit was announced, Skinner said all the team members had been selected already and they were just waiting for new hires to be ready for patrol to add them to the team. Vinje said they're expecting to add four new officers and a new sergeant in the next month or so.

Vinje said that while they're still a small team, they're working to fill the gaps in police coverage.

"We're getting inundated with requests," he said. "If you've been calling us and you don't feel like we've been helping, try again."

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