Chicago police go on record warrant blitz
150 officers take part in 3-day 'Operation Sunrise' roundup
By Jeremy Gorner
September 11, 2011

Traveling one behind the other on a gray early morning through the Far South Side, three unmarked squad cars pulled up quietly in front of a two-story apartment house — one of dozens of similar stops Chicago police Sgt. Sam Dickerson and his team of eight officers made last week.

This time Dickerson and the other plainclothes cops, all from the gang-enforcement unit, were looking for a 21-year-old man wanted on a misdemeanor domestic battery charge from October 2010. When he answered the officers' knocks on his front door, he was almost immediately placed in plastic flex-cuffs, and the team waited for a squadrol to take him to a nearby station.

Although "warrant missions" are routine, this man was one of several hundred people targeted last week in a three-day roundup of fugitives never conducted on such a large scale by Chicago police, officials said.

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Dickerson's team was among about 150 officers from gang enforcement, the fugitive-apprehension unit and tactical teams from police districts across the city participating in the sweep dubbed "Operation Sunrise."

The immense allocation of resources — part of a crime-reduction strategy implemented by Superintendent Garry McCarthy's administration — has been practiced by police in other cities, including New York when McCarthy worked there.

Chicago police estimated their warrant arrests are down 10 percent compared with the same period in 2010. But the new administration will look at ways to clear outstanding warrants.

It's about more than numbers, officials said.

"People with warrants are typically the people who are … going to repeat crimes, especially violent crimes," said Leo Schmitz, commander of the gang-enforcement unit.

Arthur Lurigio, professor of criminal justice and psychology at Loyola University Chicago, said a "critical mass" of people free on unexecuted warrants can undermine the legal system and the authority of the police.

"Both sentiments can increase crime," Lurigio said.

Although warrant apprehension programs place a strain on the court system and contribute to overcrowded jails, he said, "the key question is whether such measures are cost-effective. If
(police are) removing the most serious offenders from the streets, then the additional expenditures of time, money and person power are worth the investment."

Many of those targeted during the sweep — conducted Wednesday, Thursday and Friday in some of the most dangerous neighborhoods in Chicago — have been wanted on warrants for five years or more. Some were wanted for misdemeanors such as theft or prostitution, others for felonies including sexual assault and murder.

Officers find it difficult to track down such suspects for a variety of reasons: They may have aliases. If they were arrested previously and didn't carry identification, they might have given police wrong addresses. Some of the suspects could even be dead.

For these reasons, officials say they expect to apprehend roughly 10 percent of those sought on warrants.

During the sweep, the officers were given files on 959 wanted people: 197 on felonies, 762 on misdemeanors. Seventeen of those wanted on felonies were arrested, representing about 9 percent of the targets. Police arrested 29, or about 4 percent of the number wanted, on misdemeanors.

The domestic battery arrest by Dickerson's officers was a rarity for them during the operation. Much of the time, they knocked on doors only to find the suspects had moved out of state or elsewhere, or they had addresses for homes that are now vacant.

But he insisted that would be no excuse for his team to let its guard down. "Even with a minor warrant, it could be the same as a murder warrant," Dickerson said. "It's unknown … what can happen."

Officials said more sweeps are to come.

"This sends a great message to the people who live there," Schmitz said. "We care. Let's go get them. We want the people out of your neighborhood who are causing problems."