Police redeployment to saturation teams a return to Daley administration strategy?

By Frank Main
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Mayor Rahm Emanuel appeared to rip a page from the Daley administration’s playbook Thursday when he announced he was moving cops from desk jobs to “saturation teams” in the wake of a promising teenager’s murder, one criminologist suggested.

“When there is a crisis, the first thing a police department does is turn to special units,” said Art Lurigio, a criminologist at Loyola University.

“Is this an ad-hoc response to a tragic event that got national attention?” Lurigio said. “Or is this rolling us back to the strategies that seemed to be effective under the past administration?”

Emanuel campaigned on a promise to assign 1,000 more cops to patrols in districts. But because of retirements, there were only 11 more cops on patrol at the end of 2012 than when Emanuel took office in 2011, according to the mayor’s office, which says more beat cops will be hired this year.

On Thursday, Emanuel and Chicago Police Supt. Garry McCarthy announced they will move 200 sworn cops from desks to the street — and put civilians in those desk jobs. Instead of going on district beat patrols, though, 60 of those officers will immediately join saturation teams assigned to wider sections of the city.

The move comes after King College Prep student Hadiya Pendleton was gunned down Tuesday on the South Side, drawing coverage from Ireland to Australia.

Thursday’s announcement doubles the strength of the saturation teams that McCarthy put in place after disbanding the Targeted Response Unit and the Mobile Strike Force. They were the cornerstones of the crime-fighting strategy of former Supt. Jody Weis, McCarthy’s predecessor.

Those units were different from McCarthy’s saturation teams because they operated citywide. But Emanuel said the goal of his saturation teams and the previous units is the same: to smother outbreaks of violence.

The number of homicides in Chicago steadily decreased when the Targeted Response Unit and Mobile Strike Force were in place, Lurigio noted.

Last year, murders rose 16 percent compared with 2011, even though overall crime fell, according to the police.
Just as Emanuel’s increasing emphasis on saturation units harkens to the Daley administration, so does the effort to shift cops from desk duty to the street.

Under Daley, for example, Weis moved about 150 desk cops to the street and rotated dozens of other administrative officers to patrol duty during the summer.

John Kennedy, executive director of the Illinois Association of Chiefs of Police, said other communities in the state also have been filling police desk jobs with civilians to cope with their budget problems.

Jens Ludwig, the director of the University of Chicago Crime Lab, sees a need for the federal government to shore up the public-safety budgets of Chicago and other cities during rough economic times.

“The budget challenges that are facing cities all across the country have not received nearly enough attention as we try to understand why violent crime is increasing not just in Chicago, but in places like Detroit and Las Vegas,” Ludwig said.