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Going Door to Door

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There's a sign mounted on the walls of our Homicide office with wooden letters that read, GOYAKOD. That's not some Russian obscenity. It's a piece of advice on how to close cases. We would sit sometimes during meetings about our current cases, brainstorming ideas to generate leads. More often than not, someone would nod, smile, and say, GOYAKOD, which stands for "Get off your ass and knock on doors." If any one phrase exemplifies what good police work is, that's it.

In a major criminal investigation, getting off your ass and knocking on some doors is essential. In fact, it is a crucial element in the early stages of working an unsolved case. The area canvass-knocking on the doors of all the residences surrounding the crime scene-is one of the first tasks a lead detective should have on his lead sheet.

Why a Canvass

How often have we discovered that a killer, rapist, arsonist, or robber lives in the immediate neighborhood where the crime occurred? It comes as no surprise to us when we identify a subject who either lives, works, or visits a girlfriend a few blocks or less from our scene.

Another reason the neighborhood needs canvassing is to uncover witnesses. Doesn't every block have its own "busybody?" You know, sometimes it is an elderly woman who lives alone, keeps her eye at the blinds, and spends a longer time than usual collecting her mail and her newspaper. She knows everyone on the block, what cars belong in what driveways, when people come and go, and the current "buzz" of the neighborhood. Finding that person during a criminal investigation can be like finding buried treasure. She may not know exactly who did the crime, but she can usually tell you who the troublesome

youngsters in the area are, and which house on the block has "cars and people coming and going, all hours of the day and night."

This neighborhood snoop won't pick up the phone and call the police. You need to knock on the door, be the polite guardian of the peace that you are, accept the invitation to come inside, and maybe even listen to 20 minutes of gossip and useless neighborhood history before your shovel hits the treasure chest. This type of witness is who you are looking for in the area canvass.

The area canvass performs another, very valuable function. It puts the neighborhood on notice that the police are on the job, that we care, and that we are willing to listen to what people say. Very few neighbors will gripe about answering questions. Some will, but that's the time to educate them and explain that most criminals commit crimes in the immediate neighborhood. Then you add, "Mr. Resident, if this neighborhood has a criminal in it, wouldn't you want us to find him?"

The Right Way and the Wrong Way

If you have the luxury to do so, choose the officers who will do your area canvass with one consideration in mind. Are they easygoing and good with people? Let's face it-some of us are better on crime scenes, dealing with evidence, while some of us have a natural gift of gab and an ability to get people talking. The latter is who should be walking down the block, knocking on doors. They should be armed with a good attitude, a comfortable pair of shoes, and a good supply of business cards.

If you're going to do an area canvass, do it right. It must be thorough. By thorough, I mean that a good area canvass should go, door to door, something like this:

"Hi, I'm Detective Nyberg, with the Miami-Dade Police Department. Were you aware that we're investigating a homicide down the street here?"

Depending on the response, your conversation could go down a couple of different avenues. But one thing is certain: You need to get the names and dates of birth of everyone who lives in the home. If possible, you need to speak to all of them, too. If that means coming back to the house later, so be it. Another must is the residents' activities. Were you home all night? Did you hear or see anything unusual?

If they have already heard about the crime, how about this one: "Who did you hear it from, and what did they tell you?"

And here's another one we often forget on area canvasses: "How about this past couple of weeks or so-any suspicious cars, people, anything out of the ordinary going on?"

Who Lives Here?

Now, let's talk about the question that makes detectives and sometimes the people in the house fidget. "Who else lives here?" If you get uncomfortable going into such detail with people who seem innocent and cooperative, remember this little story.

In May 1980, Miami exploded in violent, fiery riots when a group of white police officers were acquitted by an all-white Tampa jury, after standing trial for the beating murder of a black motorcyclist. After three days, 17 homicides, and after scores of businesses were burned to the ground, it was over, and homicide detectives who were weary from being on the street and working riot duty themselves went to work investigating the cases. In one case, a white motorist was corralled by a mob, dragged from his car, beaten, and then run over.

During the area canvass, a young lady that we'll call Samantha was asked if she had been outside when the murder happened, and she said that she had stayed inside to be safe. Had she been alone? No, she told us, her boyfriend had been with her all night, and members of Samantha's family confirmed that.

Later, at the trial of one of the subjects, a witness was called by the defense. He testified that he had been out on the street during the riots, saw what had happened to the victim motorist, and that the subject on trial never approached the car and had nothing to do with it. One little problem. He was lying. He was Samantha's boyfriend. Because of a thorough area canvass, a lying witness who may have otherwise kept a killer out of prison was found out.

Canvass Immediately

The sooner the area canvass is started, the better. After all, whatever people heard and saw is fresh in their minds. Also, if they've been reluctant to pick up the phone for the past few weeks to tell the police about the drug house or the violent fights they've heard in the house next door, they might talk to officers in person after a crime. With a detective at the front door and crime scene tape visible down the street, a previously hesitant witness often will find the motivation to come forward.

Sometimes, you're on a scene at 3 a.m. More often than not, very few people were awake at the time, and unless it was an exceptionally loud crime, no one was stirred by the occurrence. You do the canvass anyway, but with the knowledge that you should probably come back at a time when more people in the household are awake.

Clearly, an area canvass is not a one-time effort. Your first trip down the block won't find all the household members home. Remember, too, that this first trip might also put you in contact with some neighbors who might not be acting quite right. So you just might be coming back.

Don't fall into the "routine" of something that is routine. Each person who comes to the door is an interview, so remember your fundamentals: Ask

compelling questions. Listen for lies and/or contradictions. Get details. Ask who told them about the crime, and what was said. Watch body language. Look and listen for red flags. Take good notes.

Remember that your Samantha, the one who is talking about her boyfriend being home with her all night, might be lying and might be giving you a rehearsed alibi for him. Ask for corroboration, and make notes of which people might need a second visit, or an invitation to a better interview setting, like your office.

How Big an Area

Just how many blocks should an area canvass encompass? The answer to this question is entirely up to the lead detective and is dictated by the type of case you have.

At the least, you should do the entire block, if you are talking about a typical residential single family home neighborhood, as well as the block "behind" (the one the back neighbor lives on).

In the case of apartment buildings, again, it is the lead detective's call. We once had a case where a woman was found beaten and strangled in an apartment on the third floor of a six-story building. We did the whole building, and we had to come back a couple of more times. It's tougher in apartment buildings to find a "busybody" or even someone who might know the victim well, so having a picture of the victim is a good idea. "Ever seen her down at the pool? In the laundry room? In the parking lot?" From there, you expand, and you ask who she was with, or what she was talking about when the witness had the encounter. Then, when another party-maybe your suspect-comes into the equation, it's time to get a picture of that suspect, or probably a photo display, and come back for another area canvass. A picture is an excellent idea regardless of what the situation is, and so it isn't a bad idea to get someone on your team working on procuring a victim's picture as soon as possible.

You have a different set of lifestyle activities working in a building residence, so adjust accordingly. Also don't forget the security guard, building manager, landlord, and other interested parties who may not live at that address but could have been present at the time of the crime.

Finally, when doing an area canvass back on the typical neighborhood street, don't forget the letter carrier. A mailman can sometimes be an excellent source of information, for a variety of reasons: the time the mail is delivered, who he has seen coming and going, what cars do and don't belong, and-if you get a cooperative mail carrier-what type of mail the victim gets.

Being a Professional Pain

Returning to a neighborhood is a necessity sometimes. In some neighborhoods, it's even a great tactic. Take the drug-infested street corner, several doors from where your caper occurred. The dealers are just itching for you to finish up so they can get back to business. I've seen them so eager to peddle their wares that they were in my rear view mirror, flagging down cars, just as I was turning to leave the block. So, if you have an unsolved case and you're pretty sure someone in the neighborhood knows who is responsible, go back again and again. Show up in the evening, when the dealers are real active,

and park a few car lengths from them, with your blue light on the dash. Then watch the frustration on their faces as their would-be customers drive by, totally spooked.

We had a case back in the '80s where we had been told that it was the local dealers who all had the low-down on what happened and why. So we parked down the street, just as I described, and we even turned on our blue lights when we saw a deal go down. One dealer stomped off in anger, cussing us every which way, and we got a great laugh out of it. We showed up in that little enclave of the projects every day and night for a solid week. We even got out of our cars, went over to a group of the local pushers, and told them, "We're gonna be hanging around here in everyone's faces until we get some answers on that homicide." We finally got our phone call, and we closed our case.

Canvass in Person

I've heard of people going back to the office, getting out the cross-reference index, and calling the residents on the phone. This is poor police work; it is lazy police work; and it is a waste of time. If you do get anyone to answer the phone in this day and age of answering machines and cell phones, you don't know who you are really talking to and, for that matter, neither do they. You are inviting them to lie, or to evade, and you are making it easy for them to do so. The only way to effectively interview anyone is face to face, where you can use all your skills of observation and where they have nowhere to hide their reactions.

In 21 years of homicide investigation I've been involved in more area canvasses than I can remember. On one case, we went back to two neighborhoods five times, each time after learning new information. By that time, we knew when the ice cream truck and private school vans were arriving, and we interviewed their drivers too. We went to the suspects' workplaces, too, and canvassed the office building there to find out more.

In doing an effective area canvass, remember that people are largely creatures of habit, that they come and go generally at the same times and the same places every day. If your area canvass uncovers a diversion from someone's routine, even a neighbor's, it might be an important trail to keep sniffing on.

Police work isn't always DNA, and luminol, and matching tire prints. In fact, more often than not, effective police work primarily involves talking to people, getting them to talk to you, and piecing the story together one witness at a time. Police work still is, and will always be, GOYAKOD.

Ramesh Nyberg is a 27-year police veteran in Miami-Dade County. He has spent the last 21 years of his career in Homicide. He also is a certified law enforcement instructor and teaches Homicide Investigation and Interview/Interrogation at his agency's training bureau.

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