

ORT Vertical Prosecution Grant Program

Local Evaluation Plan

Shop Safe Santa Barbara County

Submitted by:
Santa Barbara County District Attorney's Office

Prepared by:
Dr. Greg DeAngelo
Claremont Graduate University
gregory.deangelo@gmail.com

April 1, 2024

Project Period:
October 1, 2023 – December 31, 2026

Project Background

Santa Barbara County has been affected by the retail theft epidemic that is sweeping the nation. Over the last three years, felony burglary and theft referrals have increased by 70% in the region. The Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Office (SBSO) has recently released crime statistics which reveal that theft is the most common serious crime occurring in the county. In 2022, there were 1,758 reports of theft and 403 reports of burglary, which together, represent 95% of the serious crimes reported to the SBSO. These statistics are significant because the SBSO provides over one-third of the criminal reports reviewed annually by the Santa Barbara County District Attorney's Office (SBDA).

In response to the increase in theft in Santa Barbara County, SBDA is launching a comprehensive program aimed at combatting organized retail theft (ORT) in Santa Barbara County. The program involves the establishment of a specialized ORT Unit, comprising a full-time Deputy District Attorney (DDA) and a dedicated District Attorney Investigator. Their primary focus is on deterring, investigating, and prosecuting ORT crimes, with an additional emphasis on community outreach and prevention efforts.

ORT crimes involve strategic planning, intentional targeting of retailers, and coordinated efforts among perpetrators.

The SBDA's ORT Unit will collaborate closely with County law enforcement partners to implement a robust campaign addressing retail theft prevention with local retailers and law enforcement agencies. The Unit will adopt a vertical prosecution strategy, ensuring that the assigned attorney manages cases from initiation to resolution, streamlining interactions and improving overall efficiency.

Supervising DDA Brian Cota, with a wealth of experience in prosecuting complex major theft, fraud, and financial crimes, will oversee the SBDA ORT VP Project. Mr. Cota's insights have already influenced the program's initial design, and he will play a pivotal role in ongoing improvements. Addressing the challenge of prolonged case resolution times, the SBDA aims to expedite cases through prompt response to referrals, implementing an internal tracking system, and fostering close collaboration among investigators, victims, and attorneys.

The success of the program hinges on coordination and teamwork. The ORT Team will provide training to law enforcement agencies and community partners, conduct regular meetings to review investigations, address challenges, and ensure timely progress. The SBDA's goal is not only to secure restitution for victims but also to hold defendants accountable while seeking fair and balanced resolutions, often exploring diversion programs for qualifying cases.

SBDA is dedicated to achieving just outcomes for all stakeholders involved and is committed to ensuring justice is served for both victims and defendants beyond convictions. The Unit will actively monitor defendants' progress with restitution post-conviction and refer individuals to diversion programs when appropriate, including the recently expanded Neighborhood Restorative Justice Program.

The following goals and objectives have been highlighted to help determine the success of the program.

Goal 1: Effectively combat organized retail theft in Santa Barbara County through a vertical prosecution approach.

Objectives:

1. Screen significant theft cases for ties to organized retail theft.
2. Track theft case closure rates to demonstrate successful resolution.
3. Strive to expedite case adjudication and disposition times to prevent delays and provide timely justice for victims of retail theft.

Goal 2: Establish a countywide Organized Retail Theft Task Force.

Objectives:

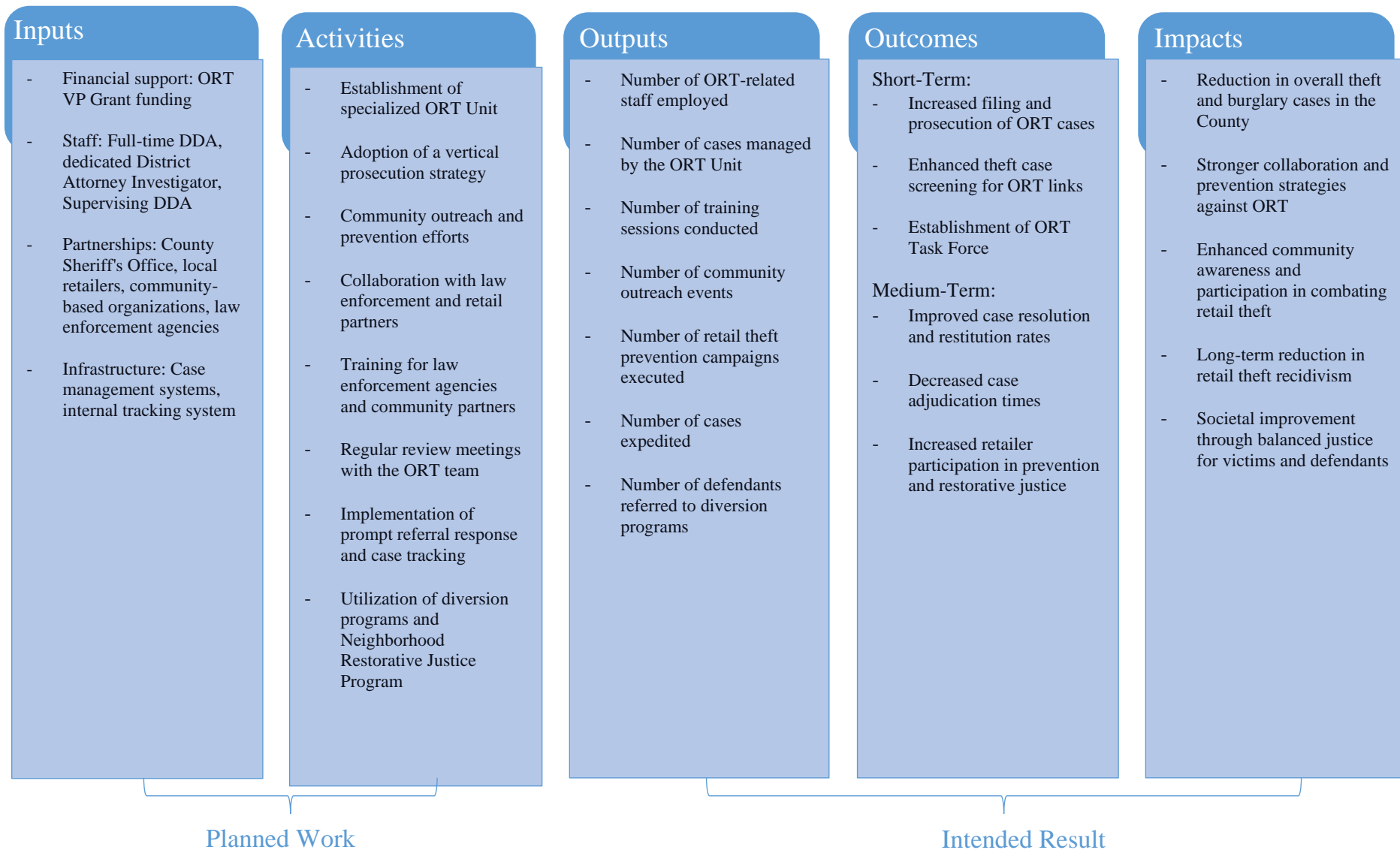
1. Work with local retailers and law enforcement agencies to strengthen the County of Santa Barbara's response to and prevention of organized retail theft.
2. Participate in community outreach events to educate retailers regarding organized retail theft and increase awareness of the common signs of organized retail theft.
3. Coordinate with the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Office and other local law enforcement agencies to develop a robust retail theft prevention campaign.

Goal 3: Use available diversion and/or restorative justice programs to address the increase in theft cases throughout Santa Barbara County.

Objectives:

1. Address the underlying causes of criminal behavior, including theft.
2. Prevent future criminal activity.
3. Encourage retailers to participate in the restorative justice process.

Project Logic Model



Process Evaluation Method and Design

Input/Resource/Activity/Output	Data Element(s)	Data Source(s)	Frequency of Data Collection
Community outreach and prevention events	Number of community outreach events	Organized Retail Theft Task Force	After each event
Establishment of specialized ORT Unit	Number of ORT investigations	Case management system	Each time an action/event occurs throughout duration of case investigation
Full-time dedicated District Attorney Investigator and full-time DDA	Number of staff assigned to ORT	Employment records, Case management system	Annually throughout duration of grant
Number of ORT-related staff employed	When staff has been hired	Employment records	Annually throughout duration of grant
Implementation of prompt case tracking system	Number of case referrals, case filings and dispositions.	Case management system	Each time a case referral occurs throughout duration of grant
Utilization of Diversion programs	Number of individuals diverted	Case management system	Upon diversion decision
Trainings for law enforcement agencies and community partners	Number of ORT Trainings for law enforcement	Manual Tracking	After each training
Retail theft prevention campaigns	Number of ORT prevention campaigns and type.	Manual Tracking	Upon conclusion of a campaign
Restitution payments for victims	When restitution payments have been ordered from and made by defendants	Organized Retail Theft Task Force, Case management system	Upon collection of restitution payments

When conducting our process evaluation of the ORT VP Project, led by Supervising DDA Brian Cota, we will draw on a mixed-methods research design. Our research design aims to provide the flexibility needed to adapt to the evolving circumstances of the project implementation and the changing environment in which the program operates, while simultaneously ensuring that the program is faithfully implemented and dutifully followed. A mixed-method research design will draw on the strengths of the qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine whether the program's intended aims are met.

Central to our process evaluation will be an assessment of the program execution. There are three broad goals of the ORT VP Project in Santa Barbara County: to reduce the number of theft cases throughout the county through available diversion and restorative justice programs, to combat retail theft through a vertical prosecution approach, and to establish a countywide ORT Task Force that can educate retailers on signs of ORT. Each of these aims has an associated set of objectives and a number of resources allocated to it. To ensure that these goals are faithfully pursued, we will be closely monitoring several inputs. First, the administrative records need to be examined to ensure their reliability; this includes both the case management systems as well as the internal tracking

systems. We also hope to hold community outreach events that educate retailers about ORT and increase awareness of common signs of retail theft. After each event, we may need to adjust our approach to ensure these events are more effectively meeting the intended aims.

There are several key variables that will facilitate our evaluation of the above inputs. We will closely monitor the number of ORT investigations to ensure that these data are accurate; given the importance of our quantitative data, we have hired quantitative research expert Dr. Greg DeAngelo with Claremont Graduate University to examine the data collection process and ensure its viability. These experts will also be drawn upon to conduct our quantitative analysis. The disposition length is another variable of importance that we will thoroughly inspect. We hope to provide timely justice for local retailers, therefore, ensuring that we are accurately collecting disposition length for each case will be important to assess whether we are effectively meeting the aim of the project. Each of the above data points will be collected at a different cadence. Some information will be collected after the filing of a case, some information will be collected annually, and some data points will be collected monthly. The process evaluation matrix above shows this frequency for each data element.

The quantitative data will be analyzed using descriptive statistics and a balance table. The descriptive statistics will provide us with a summary of key features in the data, and the balance table will allow us to compare defendant characteristics pre and post program implementation. The qualitative analysis will be conducted using observational studies to see whether the events we held as well as the collaborations we forged are adequately educating local retailers and providing them with the skills to prevent retail theft.

Outcome Evaluation Method and Design

Outcome	Definition	Data Source(s)	Frequency of Data Collection	Notes on Attribution
Increase in ORT cases filed	Increased filing of ORT cases indicates heightened enforcement and tracking efforts	Case management system; ORT tracking database	After every filing of a case	Compare with the period before the project to assess the impact of new staff or procedures
Improved conviction rates for ORT cases	Higher ratio of convictions to cases filed reflects successful prosecution efforts	Case management system; Court records	After every case closure	Analyze if the change is consistent across similar jurisdictions without such projects
Improved timeliness of ORT case filing	Decreased time from the incident to case filing reflects more efficient processes	Case management system; Incident reports	Upon case entry into the system	Measure time pre- and post-implementation of project initiatives
Improved collaboration in information sharing	More efficient and timely sharing of evidence and information between agencies	Case management system; Partnership records	Real-time as information is shared	Track number and quality of inter-agency activities
Increased case closures with restitution	Closure rates with restitution orders show successful resolutions for victims	Case management system; Financial records	Upon case closure	Compare with historical data to assess the effect of the project
Reduction in ORT repeat offenses	Lower repeat offense rates indicate effective deterrence	Criminal records; Case management system	Annually or biannually	May require long-term tracking beyond project end date
Increased diversion to restorative justice	Higher number of theft cases referred to diversion programs indicates an alternative approach	Diversion program records; Court records	Upon diversion decision	Ensure to account for overall changes in theft rates
Victims paid out in Restitution	Collect Restitution from defendants to be paid to victims of Organized Retail Theft	Case management system	Upon Restitution payment made by defendant(s)	May require short- to long-term tracking beyond project end date

The research design for the outcome evaluation of the ORT VP project is structured around a comprehensive methodological framework, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture a holistic view of the program's impact. The evaluation will primarily focus on the effectiveness of the ORT VP project in reducing incidents of retail theft within the community and improving the clearance rate of reported retail thefts. While the evaluation will

also consider the impact on recidivism rates among participants of diversion programs, this will be a secondary focus, given the grant's timeframe and the program's primary objectives.

Data Collection and Analysis

The criteria for determining the program's success will be evaluated by examining whether there is a reduction in ORT due to the community's involvement in the ORT VP project. Success will also be examined by conducting a cost-benefit analysis of the ORT VP project, as well as satisfactory program engagement and completion rates. Outcome variables will be clearly defined and measured using data extracted from the Santa Barbara District Attorney case management system, court records, and financial reports. These variables include information about the defendants, details of the theft (e.g., value of goods stolen, type of vendor victimized, etc.), the defendant's criminal history, program costs, and recidivism rates post diversion program participation.

The variables for the study include a range of data points:

Incident Specifics: The date of the offense, the value of the merchandise stolen, and a description of the incident.

Legal Outcomes: Referred and filed charges, the disposition of the case, and any details of sentencing.

Defendant Demographics: Defendant's age, ethnicity/race, gender, criminal history, employment status, and details regarding any plea deal (including diversion).

Victim Information: Size and revenue of business; name of business (to calculate the number of times the store has been victimized).

Prosecution Details: Prosecutor identifier.

Diversion Program Data: Defendant's eligibility for diversion, their recommendation status, the type of program, and the dates of entry and completion.

Recidivism Metrics: As a secondary focus, the instances of recidivism, the timing and types of re-offenses, and the subsequent legal outcomes will be analyzed.

Statistical Research Design

The quantitative data analysis will employ econometric models such as regression analyses and synthetic difference-in-differences to assess the causal impact of the ORT VP Project on the number of retail thefts. This involves employing multiple regression analyses that control for a range of covariates, which might influence the outcome variable—ORT levels. By adjusting for factors such as the defendant's criminal history, the severity of the offense, demographic variables,

and police presence, the analysis aims to isolate the specific effect of the ORT VP Project from other, possibly confounding elements.

The statistical design will implement a synthetic difference-in-differences approach. This approach allows the researcher to estimate the causal effect that the ORT VP Project has on reducing the number of ORT. Synthetic difference-in-differences constructs a synthetic counterfactual based on appropriate control groups—those individuals that are ineligible for a diversion program. This synthetic group is created by generating weights that minimize the difference between the treated and control group prior to any intervention being implemented. Once a synthetic counterfactual is created, the treatment effect is estimated by comparing the outcome changes in the treated unit and the synthetic group pre- and post-intervention.

Lastly, several placebo tests will be conducted that will confirm the validity of our results. The same empirical methods outlined above will be employed, however, the analysis will be conducted on other forms of criminal activity—those that should not be impacted by the ORT VP Project—or time periods prior to the deployment of the ORT VP Project to ensure that the results are not driven by other underlying mechanisms.

This comprehensive econometric approach ensures that the evaluation can credibly attribute changes in the number of retail theft instances to the ORT VP Project, accounting for a wide array of potential confounders and employing statistical techniques to derive accurate and reliable estimates of the program's effectiveness. Through this econometric design, the evaluation aims to offer evidence on the impact of the ORT VP Project, contributing valuable insights to the discourse on criminal justice reform and policy optimization.

Cost-Benefit Analysis

To assess the new ORT VP Project, a cost-benefit analysis (CBA) will be conducted to evaluate direct and indirect financial implications. Direct expenditures of running the ORT VP Project, social costs from criminal activities, and the burden of crime prosecution will be assessed. This analysis will quantify these expenses to weigh them against the benefits of decreased criminal involvement due to the ORT VP Project. The CBA will utilize empirical data on how the ORT VP Project affects the levels of ORT in the community.

Operational costs will be gauged by determining the total expenses for the Santa Barbara District Attorney's Office from county budgets. This data provides a basis for calculating the average prosecution cost per case, which will serve as a benchmark for evaluating the cost-efficiency of handling cases through the ORT VP Project. The CBA will then compare the cost of an individual's participation in the program against the savings from reduced criminal activities. If the savings exceed the program's costs, it affirms the program's financial sensibility.

However, the analysis will also consider additional benefits of the ORT VP Project, which may justify its continuation even if it does not meet the conventional cost-benefit criteria. Such benefits, potentially non-monetary or longer-term in nature, will be identified and included in the overall findings, ensuring a comprehensive evaluation of the ORT VP Project's value.

Qualitative Analysis

In conducting a qualitative analysis of the Operational Efficacy of the ORT VP Project, the research will employ a multi-faceted approach. The primary methodology will include structured interviews and focus groups, which will gather in-depth insights from program administrators, law enforcement, and judiciary members. These interviews will aim to explain the perceived strengths and operational challenges directly from the individuals responsible for implementing the ORT VP Project.

Case studies will be instrumental in providing a comprehensive examination of the program's implementation. By analyzing specific measures taken through the ORT VP Project, the research can identify patterns and variances in the program's execution, offering a granular understanding of its efficacy.

Additionally, the analysis will incorporate participant observation at community outreach events. This method will allow for a first-hand evaluation of the program's engagement strategies and their effectiveness in educating retailers about organized retail theft.

Observational data will be complemented by surveys distributed to retailers' post-event, aiming to capture their qualitative feedback and measure changes in awareness.

Together, these qualitative methods will provide a rich, detailed picture of the ORT VP Project's operational efficacy and its ability to engage and safeguard the community. This approach ensures that the findings are grounded in real-world experiences and perceptions, thereby enhancing the validity and applicability of the research conclusions