

Community Policing: Success In Lowell



Partnership Is The Key To Our Success

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The Herman Goldstein Award Selection Committee
Police Executive Research Forum (PERF)
1120 Connecticut Ave., NW, Suite 930
Washington, D.C.

To whom it may concern,

It is with great pride that I offer for submission the work of a team of officers from the Lowell, Massachusetts Police Department for consideration in the 1998 Herman Goldstein Award for Excellence in Problem-Oriented Policing.

Last summer, recognizing the need for structured POP training for a greater number of officers from my department, I eagerly hosted the Law Enforcement Assistance Network. Never did I dream their introductory training would ignite one of the most important initiatives my department has undertaken.

One group of officers - Capt. Susan Siopes, Sgt. David Tousignant, and Officers Christopher Bomil, Vanessa Dixon, Frank Dumont, John Kiernan, Jason Nobrega, Miguel Pol, and John Samaras - set out to address crime in the downtown. They ended up embarking on a project that targeted the greater problem of truancy, an ill that underscored much of the problems facing not only our downtown, but also the entire city.

This POP team has spent the past year focusing on truancy. What is significant here is the number of other disciplines that have been brought to the table to address this issue. Realizing the problem went far beyond just a law enforcement issue, my officers enlisted several other agencies to help address the problem. As a result, we now have in our city an unprecedented partnership with the Lowell School Department, as well as the Departments of Social and Youth Services, Lowell District Court, and numerous social organizations.

The results speak for themselves: a 61% reduction in truancy in one year was a greater dividend than any of us imagined. With the summer now upon us, plans are already underway to refine our plan for next year's academic year.

What began as a classroom exercise has become one of the staples of the way we do business here in Lowell. It is a program that has been incorporated into our strategic plan, and one I expect to see flourish for some time to come. I commend each of the officers involved in this initiative. I applaud their application of the principles of their POP training. And I proudly offer them for consideration for your prestigious award. Please feel free to contact me should you have any other questions regarding this project.

Sincerely,

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**1998 Herman Goldstein Award For Excellence in Problem-Oriented Policing
Lowell, Massachusetts Police Department PACT Truancy Initiative**

Several Lowell Police Department patrol officers, during a POP training session in 1997, identified a problem in the downtown Lowell area with teens who were causing major and chronic problems for merchants, customers, and elderly residents in the daytime. These problems were categorized as disorder type problems and crimes.

The officers discovered the underlying cause was mainly students from the nearby high school who were not attending school - truants. Officers confirmed this when they spoke with high school officials who provided statistics of a 20% average daily absence rate (almost 600 students) for a school population of over 2900 students. They also discovered that staffing of the school attendance office consisted of one full time and 4 part time truant officers that were expected to handle a city student load of over 16,000.

Knowing they could not handle the problem of truancy alone, these officers invited all stakeholders in the problem to the table to discuss possible solutions. A cooperative effort called PACT, Partnership Against Chronic Truancy, was created which included core members - police and schools - and cooperation from the courts, probation, school committee, businesses, and agencies like the Department of Youth Services, to name only some of the players

Responses were formulated and divided into short term and long term goals. Truancy sweeps and home follow-ups on chronic truants were instituted for the short term. Education for the whole community on truancy and its associated ills was slated for both the short term and long term.

The success of this initiative thus far can be measured both in statistics and the high level of cooperation and compliance the PACT team has obtained from all the major stakeholders, including students, parents, the criminal justice system, the media, the community itself. A 61% drop in street level truancy, a 7% increase in daily high school attendance levels, and a drop in school truancy levels for the whole city, all in one year, are some of the results of this ongoing initiative.

A. Scanning

In early 1997, more than fifty members of the Lowell Police Department received a comprehensive Problem-Oriented Policing training - both field-based and classroom - under the direction of the Law Enforcement Assistance Network. During the training, one breakout group chose to examine problems in our downtown neighborhood, most of which were being caused by teens. The problems consisted of rampant shoplifting, and a general fear among the elderly of the youth who gathered in the downtown. Officers who patrolled the downtown had been receiving complaints about rude teens that were jostling the elderly, using profane language, and blocking the sidewalk. The complaints came not only from the elderly residents, but also from shopkeepers, and customers of the businesses in the downtown area.

In the analysis portion of their approach to this problem, the officers quickly realized the larger scope issue of youth problems downtown could be directly attributable to an underlying issue, that of widespread truancy problems at the high school. The city's high school, with an enrollment of over 3,000 students, is located in the heart of the downtown. The majority of the problems were occurring during school hours, and were being committed by students who were supposed to be in school - truants.

The involved officers felt that by addressing the underlying problem of truancy, they would address many of the other crimes of disorder as well as address the concerns of fear in our business district. At the same time, the officers felt they would be able to dramatically impact the lives of the students who were squandering their lives by not attending school and by engaging in criminal activity. A problem that started out

focusing on crime in the downtown had zeroed in on a more specific problem but was now addressing an issue that affected the entire city.

B. Analysis

Officers initially performed both oral and written surveys in the downtown to gather more information about the problem. Officers surveyed customers, business owners, residents, and students.

The POP group of officers also gathered some basic statistics from the high school to determine how many enrolled students were not attending school on a day to day basis, what this truant population looked like, and what safeguards were in place to monitor and reduce truancy.

Truancy has been a chronic problem in Lowell. When the POP officers obtained their information from the high school, they discovered that there was only one full-time attendance officer working for the Lowell Public Schools, with a staff of four part-timers. With approximately 16,883 students enrolled in Lowell schools, it was easy to see why the attendance officers were doing no proactive work. The truancy officers felt forced to address only the worst, most chronic truancy cases, therefore allowing other students to progress to the chronic stage without any early intervention. Truancy, however, is a community problem, and everyone had abdicated responsibility for the problem - parents, schools, the criminal justice system, and the students themselves. The time had come for someone to begin a process of reinstating accountability.

Specific stakeholders in the process have already been alluded to - the students, the parents, the schools, the police, the courts, and the community. We also specifically

added the Department of Probation, the Department of Youth Services (DYS), and the Department of Social Services (DSS) as stakeholders because they are often the surrogate "parents" and legal custodians of many of the truants. During our planning for the response phase, we also added the media, the district attorney's office, the juvenile session of court, and the Lowell School Committee as stakeholders.

Our officers found that truancy caused problems on several levels, both directly and indirectly. When no one assumes responsibility for the problem, it festers.

Almost all of the students suffer, both those who commit truancy and those who stay in school. Students who do not attend school or obtain a high school diploma have been shown over and over to be more likely to commit crimes. They are more likely to be unable to secure decent jobs, adequately raise and support a family, and are poor role models for their children. The students who do attend school know who the truants are, and when nothing happens to stop truancy, students believe it is not deemed important by adults and many begin to devalue the importance of attending school.

Parents have a legal and moral responsibility to send their children to school. If they abrogate their responsibilities, the children again are victimized.

School systems have a responsibility to see that students do attend school. Proactive and responsive school personnel send the message that attending school is important. If truancy is not vigorously addressed, it helps to create a languishing atmosphere in school and breeds apathy about attendance. On the practical side, school systems lose accreditation standings and funding when non-attendance rates climb above acceptable limits.

Police must respond to the calls that truants generate - kids disturbing, gang issues, property damage, burglaries, tagging, and shoplifting. If we do not attack the underlying cause of these crimes, we continuously respond to a growing call load of petty and sometimes more serious crimes. In turn, we will have to respond to an angry community and political structure that expect their police to address and solve these fear generating incidents.

Looking at a neighborhood, such as the downtown, we can see the visible harm of truancy on the elderly, the issues of disorder, and the elevated levels of fear. An interesting, though not totally unexpected phenomenon of our business survey, revealed that most shoplifting was going unreported by the business owners, some of whom were experiencing losses of over \$150 a day. Most of the businesses surveyed had also experienced vandalism and tagging, and did not report it, believing it an acceptable loss. Of the students surveyed, 52% of them reported committing a crime on a day when they either cut a class or school all together.

If the courts and probation system do not change their focuses from reactive to proactive, the spiraling cycle of arrests and releases will continue to grow, dockets will swell, and probation loads will increase.

The analysis revealed existing conditions in the school system and at the high school that helped the problem of truancy flourish. The small number of attendance officers, the physical layout of the school and its proximity to the downtown, and the minimal security at the school were all contributing factors. The process for handling tardiness and the system of disciplining truants played roles here as well. There were

only six disciplinarians at the school, and in-house suspension only had the capacity to detain 22 students.

On any given day, 20% of the student population was not attending the high school. This translated into almost 600 students per day. School officials first estimated that about half of those students were truant, however those numbers changed in later discussions with the high school administration. Freshmen were the most likely to be truant, although the numbers were distributed across the four grades. Initial analysis did not reveal particulars about the truants, but that information was developed on the truancy sweeps that followed. Clearly, by anybody's reckoning, truancy was a problem.

So who does truancy harm? Under analysis, in the end, everyone.

C. Response

During their POP training, officers narrowly focused on the downtown as their target zone to improve conditions. Because the officers had chosen a topic that revealed a complex problem too big for a quick fix, the officers knew they could not mount a full response to solve this problem during their POP training. The officers became concerned that they had identified a legitimate problem, but did not believe they could follow through on the solving of the problem once their classroom training was over. Before the officers left the training, Police Superintendent Edward Davis wasted no time in letting the officers know they had unearthed a serious community problem, one that he would commit the department's resources to solving. The Superintendent asked his command staff for a volunteer interested in following through on the project with the patrolmen. Capt. Susan Siopes signed on, along with Sgt. David Tousignant. Officers Christopher

Bomil, Vanessa Dixon, Francis Dumont, John Kieman, Jason Nobrega, Miguel Pol, and John Samaras joined them on their team.

The team immediately recognized that it could not solve the problem alone. They also realized it would take time to both create and implement a solution. The team decided that both short and long term goals were necessary. A top priority was establishing a closer relationship with the high school administration and with the Lowell Public Schools to better understand the truancy problem, and to determine how aware the school was of their role in the project.

Last summer, the police department organized a meeting to craft a plan of attack. Several stakeholders were invited - DARE officers, Juvenile Services detectives, the high school administration, school attendance officers, the police and school administrations, the Lowell School Committee, the Mayor, the Downtown Lowell Business Association, and representatives from the offices of the district attorney, probation, youth services and social services. The meeting was a success by all accounts. The members of the police team had choreographed their presentation - visuals, handouts, an agenda, and refreshments. All invitees attended and everyone spoke their piece.

The group, after much discussion, decided on a name for the new partnership between the school and police departments - the Partnership Against Chronic Truancy (PACT). The group also established several long and short-term goals.

The short-term goals would be aimed at reducing street truancy levels, especially in the downtown. We also needed to positively impact attendance levels at the high school and bring the levels up to state guidelines. We needed to focus on gaining

attendance compliance from the occasional truants and from those considering skipping school.

Short-term Goals

- Plan and begin truancy sweeps. Sweeps were intended to directly and immediately impact truancy levels and the visible truancy, such as teens hanging out in the downtown or in parks during school hours. The focus of the sweeps would include all students on the streets of not just downtown Lowell, but the surrounding suburban streets. The team particularly wanted to target the occasional truants or those contemplating the act. Sweep teams always consisted of a police officer, as well as high school administrators, security officers, or school attendance officers. Probation officers and DYS officers, who joined when available, were particularly effective because they knew many of the teens we encountered, and provided immediate consequences to students under their supervision. In all, nine sweeps were performed during the past school year. In most cases, about a half dozen teams hit the streets after the last morning bell - one or two on foot in the downtown, the rest in cruisers covering the outskirts. We filled out field intelligence cards on each student encountered, and performed warrant checks if they were known gang members. They were then transported via the DARE van to a holding area at the high school. If they were students at other schools, they were taken there. But the high school students were then remanded to in-house suspension for the day. We found few parents willing to come and pick up their child. The high school provided at least two substitute teachers to watch and control the group, along with a uniformed police

officer. Service providers were summonsed to the high school to speak with the teens about alternatives. Specifically, the Boy's Club, Girls Inc., the Lowell Teen Coalition, and Big Brother/Big Sister each sent representatives over to meet with truants. The sweeps usually lasted three hours. Of note, during the later sweeps performed, police officers involved responded to calls regarding schooltime burglaries. On both calls, the suspects arrested were truant teens. Sweeps are time and labor intensive, but are also effective. We found that the informal communication system among students got the word out quickly after the first truants were rounded up. We varied the times of our sweeps, as well as the days of the weeks and the frequency of them. The Middlesex County District Attorney's office provided a grant to the PACT team, providing for overtime not only for police officers, but for the substitute teachers and for lunches for the truants. (See attached press release.)

- Home follow-ups with the parents of truants. Home follow-ups helped notify parents about their children's actions, educated parents about their responsibility to send children to school, and let parents know they would be held accountable for their child's education. School attendance officers and a police officer performed follow-ups. The teams visited the truant's home, checked out the living conditions, and sometimes summonsed social service intervention.
- Summonsing non-compliant parents to court. Parents of chronic truants who were made aware of their child's situation and their parental responsibility and chose not to comply were then summonsed to a show cause hearing in court. To help guarantee speedy and responsive reactions within a bloated court docket, members of the PACT

went to Lowell District Court and met with the Clerk of Courts and head of Juvenile Probation. The officers were assured that any requests for hearings on truancy matters would be processed quickly with the full support of the court.

- Utilize a variety of means and media to educate students, parents, and the rest of the community about truancy. Lowell has the second largest Southeast Asian population in the United States, as well as a sizable Spanish speaking population. Clearly, language barriers needed to be addressed within our public education. The Lowell Police and the Lowell Public Schools created a truancy brochure with the assistance of the district attorney's office. (Please see attachment.) The brochure contained messages to both students and parents and was sent to the homes of every high school student. Members of the PACT also attended community meetings to help spread the word. Locally, the media also covered the story, within the pages of the Lowell Sun, on Media One cable news, WCAP radio, the Voice of Cambodia radio show and through the Southeast Asian Task Force. (See attached articles.)

Long Term Goals

- Create a better in-house suspension system at the high school, one able to handle on a day-to-day basis, a larger group, such as truants picked up in a sweep.
- Continue to educate the community at large about the problem of truancy, and what they can do to help minimize it.
- The high school needs to assess the needs of those truants skipping school because they are unable to keep up with their studies or because they are working. The high school will then provide Fast Track classrooms to get students up to speed or need

help with their homework. There is some initial planning underway for a night school program for students out of school to support a family.

- Continue to monitor truancy levels.
- Continue truancy sweeps. We need to institutionalize the sweeps into the day-to-day processes of the school and police departments. On the police side, this means involving patrol officers across the shift. Currently we have five School Resource Officers in the middle schools. They are gradually being drawn into the process. We need to increase the truancy intervention in the middle schools. If we can ingrain attitudes against truancy in the earlier years, we believe there will be significant increases in high school attendance and dropout levels.

Early on, we checked on the legality of the sweeps, and how we needed to perform them. Specifically, the truancy law gives power and authority to the school attendance officers to enforce truancy. We needed to make sure that a team that transported the teens included a truancy officer. Our attempts to discern community values and concerns occurred during the survey process undertaken during the analysis phase of this project.

Practicality is always an issue and sometimes disregarded in the heat of planning a righteous initiative such as this one. We know that chronic truancy is a key underlying factor leading to other community ills, however we needed the community to support and fund initiatives such as ours. Being practical, we set long terms goals to institutionalize some of the process into day-to-day operations.

D. Assessment

The results of the PACT initiative are very positive. Contrasting the total number of truants on the streets in June, 1997 with the number on the streets in May, 1998 showed a 61% drop in just one year. Lowell High School's truancy numbers have also been cut by more than half, 57%, in just one year.

In 1997, Lowell High School administrators supplied a set of data regarding daily attendance and absence records as well as breakdowns for several other categories. With comparison to the 1998 school year, the numbers show that attendance at the high school rose 7% in one year, and that the high school now meets state guidelines for attendance. At times, attendance levels spiked at over 90%.

Gross numbers of non-attending students at the high school have been reduced dramatically. In 1997, on any given day, an average of 575 students did not attend school. In 1998, even though enrollment numbers were up, an average of 390 students were absent.

Our PACT team helped obtain the buy-in and support of stakeholders, especially the schools and the criminal justice system, for the problem of truancy and for finding and implementing solutions together. We helped reduce street truancy levels, especially in the downtown, and positively impacted attendance and truancy levels at the high school. In the process, we helped bring the high school up to levels within state guidelines. We now perform truancy sweeps regularly, as well as home follow-up visits for students who do not comply with school rules.

Citywide, truancy levels have dropped, the crime rate continues to drop (see attached graphic) and the PACT effort has helped identify more gang members and their affiliations.

A follow-up survey of the downtown is in progress. Anecdotal information supports the conclusion that the quality of life for people downtown has improved in the past year. The high school is crafting a more effective suspension process, including earlier intervention. New attendance taking policies are being planned for the fall.

Concerns about the truants being displaced to an indoor location did not happen. Obviously, because of the nature of truancy, our PACT will need to continue monitoring the problem, throughout coming school years.

E. Agency and Officer Information

This POP project was undertaken by a team of patrol officers, under the supervision of a sergeant and a captain. The officers came from throughout the three shifts of the police department. They were supported by being given flexible schedules, cruisers for their sweeps, and other supplies and departmental resources such as computers, and data analysis personnel when needed.

All of the principals involved in the project through the police department received POP training prior to launching their campaign. POP training has also been ongoing. Training manuals provided by the Police Executive Research Forum were instrumental research guides for the officers in the employment of the SARA model. Officers involved in the project were able to accumulate some compensatory time for

their work. In May, all of the officers received a Distinguished Unit Action Bar during the police department's annual awards ceremony.

There were very few problems that arose during this project. Officers quickly found out during this case that the SARA model is not a totally linear process.

The entire process stayed within a very limited budget, and was only supplemented during the past two months utilizing money provided through the district attorney's grant.

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