

Problem Oriented Policing

Submission to PERF1999 Herman Goldstein Award for excellence in POP

Abstract.

Using the basis for Problem Oriented Policing and Community Police Partnerships this project has managed to unite both philosophies. By utilizing Internet technology members of a community can identify and possibly solve their own problems while in the same time enabling police representatives to keep well informed of the problem.

The proposal would see the police beat officer connected to the Internet and would be the moderator of an e-mail listserver. Residents that encounter ongoing problems may "post" the nature of the problem to the list thus immediately making all residents on the list aware of the problem

Another resident may be able to assist with the initial problem such as: - they have experienced similar problems and not bothered to report it to police. Or have knowledge of the birth of the problem and then inform the list or have no knowledge of the problem and use the post as a "keep a look out for".

Scanning

Utilizing the Neighborhood Police Beats in Townsville this project would assist with problems in residential neighborhoods not previously recorded in calls for service statistics.

Analysis

Neighborhood communities around Townsville consider that minor problems may not be worthy of reporting to police. This project ensures problems are reported and where applicable problems are solved by the community themselves without the need for police attendance.

Response

Prior to this project information flow was almost non-existent with minor problems and unless police time was spent speaking to every resident on individual basis knowledge of the problem was minimal. This project has ensured police-community partnerships in solving problems.

Assessment

Utilizing the performance indicator instruments available through the commercial site and on-line surveys and the clear up rate of crime there was a decrease in follow on crime from solving initial minor problems.

Introduction

The aim of beat policing is to make individual police officers primarily responsible for the policing of a designated geographical area, or "beat". Beat officers are assigned to their areas on a long-term basis and work out of an office located in the beat. They patrol on foot wherever possible, use their local knowledge to decide when and where to patrol, and employ proactive strategies to address the underlying policing problems of their beat.

Toowoomba, Queensland was the site for the beat policing pilot project. This phase lasted for 2 years and each beat officer was provided with a residence and a motor bike but was expected to patrol on foot. The beat officers were selected because of their ability to exercise control and responsibility, their interpersonal skills, and their commitment to experimenting with a proactive style of policing.

Beat policing entertains the ethos of Problem Orientated Policing. This approach to policing relates to ownership of policing problems. It is up to the officer to work in conjunction with the community to formulate strategies to overcome these problems. For example if youths were out late at night and causing a problem within an area, traditional policing methods would be to move them on and not address the underlying problem. The next shift may well be required to further react. With a POP approach, it would be up to the beat officer to examine the causal factors of the problem and, with the input of any other key stakeholders, implement measures to reduce or remove the occurrence. Ideally the beat officer should be able to have thorough knowledge of their areas and the people who live there. This alone would be an excellent intelligence resource for all police. (Henss, P QPS Internet)

Ownership of local problems in the designated beat area belongs to the beat officer. If the beat officer is part of the community in which they work then their ownership of community problems is likely to be greater. Unless residents inform the officer of every problem the likelihood of the beat officer becoming aware of all problems is minimal.

Although the amount of people connected to the Internet in the beat communities is relatively low it is predicted that on-line membership will increase in the following years (ABS 1998 report)

E-mail listserver

Initially utilising the services of www.onelist.com, which is a commercial website, based in USA a local "Electronic Neighborhood Watch" was set up. By logging on to the site potential administrators can set up their own list group. Once set up the group or "list" is given a specific e-mail address. In this case it was SouthTownsvillepolicebeatfg@onelist.com. The list is exactly the same idea as the POLICE-L list available only to police personnel on the CUNY server and other email groups.

Residents of the local beat area were then encouraged to "subscribe" to the list and numerous flyers were printed describing the concept and the address. In the mean time the moderator of the list had set up courtesy of Onelist.com certain security preferences for the list. Potential subscribers must be approved before they are subscribed. The criterion in this case was they either worked or resided in the geographic beat area.

Scanning

South TownsviUe is a very old suburb of TownsviUe. It contains light industrial, commercial and residential. The sea port infrastructure is located in the South TownsviUe area as is a very large prawn trawler fleet. The trawler workers are mostly itinerant seasonal employees and by nature have been known to come under police attention. Unique to this area is an on-going park problem. There are some 5 park reserves that contain public toilets, play equipment and light gardens. Over the past years families utilising the park facilities have been replaced with groups of homeless people who spend their days drinking in the parks.¹ Urinating and fighting.

The main riverside street of South TownsviUe is Palmer Street, which has been established as a classy sidewalk café and restaurant strip. In the middle of the strip is a homeless drop-in centre run by a voluntary organisation. The problem of "park people" walking from the local hotel past the restaurant strip to the parks has resulted in park people harassing diners and creating an atmosphere not suited to the café image which was attempting to be created. As a result the South TownsviUe Police Beat was established as a 2 officer non-residential model with an Aboriginal/ Torres Strait Police Liaison Officer.

Beat philosophy dictates that the beat officers¹ address underlying problems in the residential areas of South TownsviUe as well as the park problem. A survey of resource usage revealed 80% of police time was spent with the park people and close to the remainder spent with associated paperwork. (Henss:Northern Region Survey)

As other police beats became operational at Kelso, Rasmussen and Garbutt the marketing of beat philosophy became more public and the "bread and butter" of beat policing which was publicised was not being achieved at South TownsviUe. Local South TownsviUe residents complained that their beat officers weren't performing, as they should.

Local residents stated that young juveniles were still roaming the streets at night, some park people would deviate into residential areas, and problems of gangs of very small children were still congregating.

¹ The social problem of indigenous people frequenting the parks is too great to touch on in this submission.

Analysis

The location of the police beats was determined by analysing calls for service data. This data became available as a result of communication staff recording requests for service onto computer aided dispatch using "Escort" software and previously the local database available utilising a 4D relational database.

Calls to service were recorded by job classification, date, time and address. This information was then downloaded, charted and plotted onto mapping software (MapInfo). Based on availability of establishments and other factors the police beat office was established.

The implementation of the listserver was put on hold due to internal IT reasons however a very small trial was conducted using the authors personal computer and another Townsville Residents e-mail list and the ICQ program.

By graphing and plotting the calls to service data and comparing it to recorded crime which was also graphed and plotted an analysis was made of Hotspots and repeat calls for service. The primary problem was that of the park people and subsequently young juveniles lacking supervision.

Resource studies utilising hand written logs or running sheets submitted by the beat officer revealed up to 70% of that time was spent dealing with the park problem. Of that 10% was spent in arrest, 13% with associated paperwork and 30% with community based policing of the problem and the remainder with actual patrols.

The remainder time was spent with residential foot patrols and other pro active policing strategies. Subsequently little time was spent following up associated problems located within residential areas.

By conducting on-line surveys using ICQ, Townsville Residents e-mail list and the small proportion on the project listserver it was revealed 90% of problems the community thought police could deal with was juveniles roaming the streets unsupervised, while the remainder consisted of numerous other offences typical with a residential area.

Using suspect names given to the author, his own knowledge of the area, address checks via the Polaris warrant system and an Activity Report Index system it was revealed that the origin of the problem can be put down to 5 houses in the suburb. Each family responsible was directly connected to the social problem of the park people vis: non-parental supervision due to increased alcohol abuse.

Prior to the establishment of the police beat and the listserver traditional reactive policing would concentrate on responding to calls for service, random patrols and profile patrolling. There was no communication between other residents that may have been involved, the origin of the problem and other police. It was possible for each shift to

attend a given address one per shift over a period of a day with no knowledge of previous problems or information exchange.

Information from on-line surveys revealed numerous residents would be aware of a given problem and on average one resident would have sufficient knowledge of the given problem to solve it. In one example numerous residents were aware of young juveniles roaming certain streets and another resident who has a good rapport with a relative of the children stated that by informing that relative of their child's behaviour the problem could be solved. The relative often was not aware of their child's actions. Subsequently chance saw this particular resident become aware of the given problem.

Response

As a result of the analysis it was revealed that by uniting South Townsville residents and improving information exchange then it was more likely that information flow would be greater. Other police- community partnership programs include neighbourhood meetings however having attended numerous meetings as a police representative maintaining dynamic interest proved to be difficult. By bringing neighbourhood meetings to the residents then there was greater likelihood of successful information flow.

Analysis of the on-line community revealed that there was sufficient people connected to prove the project viable. Surveys of people connected revealed that they were more likely to stay at home while connected rather than attend neighbourhood meetings or even phone police to report information. By providing a regular flow of information interest in reporting matters is more likely to be maintained

However with all social demographics there are individuals likely to take matters further than the acceptable limit. It was revealed that during the trial one individual was too eager to follow up matters in their own way. Although information exchange is beneficial there needs to be safeguards to the dissemination of that information, as does there needs to be safeguards to the publicising of defamatory material on a person.

The moderator controlled measures that are available in onelist.com proved to be a useful safeguard. Members can post while remaining anonymous, all messages posted to the list must be authorised and go through the police beat officer acting as the list moderator.

After a short period of list activity and numerous vetting of messages residents soon became useful members of the list. All information was filtering past the police officer and as a result the officer had a complete grasp of problems associated within the beat area. On some occasions the beat officer could solve problems via e-mail or in true problem solving methodology a resident on the list would come up with solutions to a given problem.

In one example the communications room notified police to be on the look out for a suspect in the area. The beat officer then e-mailed the broadcast and description to the list and one resident on the list contacted police whom then arrested the suspect.

In a short time all desktop service computers will be connected to the Internet. The current commercial site is free to use however with all police information technology the issue of security is paramount. The establishment of a secure service approved listserver is costly however utilising the existing programs there is no cost to the department.

In areas where legality is not as strict for publishing names or there is a strict vetting procedure for list members the time involved for the beat officer can be substantially reduced if all posts to the list were "live" and not authorised before sending out. At present the beat officer must allot some time to reading, replying to and forwarding e-mails to the list.

Assessment

In the short time the listserver was operating calls for service were decreased by 40%. During a survey of the on-line community most of the people spoken to agree with the concept and satisfaction appeared to be higher.

Based on the previous analysis of calls for service data by job code it is probably that most of a specific job type can be dealt with in such a way. The greatest success factor in this trial was the flow of information. It is difficult to measure the success of the intelligence gained in such a short time as much intelligence is stored until it is recalled by specialist support services.

Such a listserver is a new concept and without a larger scale implementation it is difficult to gauge the success. Research with various resources such as copnet.com, officer.com, policeforum.org and popnet indicate this concept has not been tried before as an incentive.

Conclusion

All finding, given that the trial and project was short, support that such a project would be a success providing that the beat police officer monitors the quality of the information.

If the beat officer did not spend adequate time with the proposal then the information that became available would not be accurate.

The trial in South Townsville was not as large as needed because the proposed pamphlet drops and media release relied on having a site whereby potential users can refer to and receive joining instructions. The proposed site would be an addition to the

QPS web site. Information Managers however would not authorise the proposed changes due to a number of reasons and there was no major launch of invitations. A micro trial was conducted and all available results used in this presentation.

Agency Information

- The major stakeholders in this project were the police beat officers at South Townsville and the residents of the beat area.
- There was no training conducted throughout the project with the exception of basic email instruction. None of the community received training except for trial and error and due to the setup of the listserver none of the "error" messages were published.
- There was no past problem solving examples used by police. Residents that took part were not questioned in depth.
- Budget resources were close to zero. Prior to the scrapping of the full trial a small quantity of stationary was used for the production of flyers.

Contact details

- Peter HENSS
- Sergeant - Project Officer
- PO Box 2228
- Townsville Queensland
- Australia 4810
- Phone 0747 221630
- phenss@iname.com