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Foot Patrols: Crime Analysis and Community Engagement to Further the Commitment to Community Policing



When community stakeholders discuss strategies for enhancing public safety through community policing, the subject of foot patrols inevitably arises. Sometimes deemed old fashioned by the rank and file, foot patrols may be effective not only as a means of curbing crime in neighborhoods, enhancing community partnerships, and keeping officers in touch with local activity, but also as a means for departments to lessen the impact of high fuel costs.

Historically, foot patrols are the oldest form of police patrol work. The use of foot patrols decreased substantially in the last century before reemerging as a community policing tool. The benefits, particularly in the form of community goodwill and improved relationships between the police and community, may help to explain the recent resurgence in this practice. Coupled with the high gas prices in 2008, foot patrols are once again being used as a community policing tool.

As with many policing strategies, departments adapt their approaches to community and departmental needs. Historically, foot patrols had a small effect on crime, but significant changes have been recorded with increased community stratification. Departments that take the positive elements of foot patrols and combine their efforts with data analysis that focuses on the time, location, and type of crime, may use the findings to develop strategies to decrease crime and enhance the quality of life in their communities.

Crime prevention and community satisfaction with police services, while linked to the number of officers on the streets, does not depend entirely on the visibility of patrol officers. Community engagement, targeted initiatives, strategic use of resources, and data-driven decision-making contribute to decreasing crime. Foot patrols should be perceived and promoted as an important component of the department's strategic operating plan.

The following are key initiatives that a department can use to pave the way for foot patrols to succeed:

- Determine the date, time, and location of service calls by type, and create representative maps to aid in efficient and effective deployment.
- Complement statistical analysis with a community survey to obtain the opinions of residents and business owners regarding priority issues.
- Invite the community to participate in planning sessions.
- Recruit a range of individuals (both officers and civilians) to use various models of patrol, demonstrating that both police and civilians can address public expectations through a variety of approaches such as volunteer efforts with neighborhood watch programs and crime-prevention programming.

Strategic Planning

Foot patrols should be developed as part of a proactive, integrated problem-solving strategy and not as a reactive response to an incident. The following are useful steps for developing and deploying successful foot patrols:

- Establish a structure for long-term implementation and evaluation. Plan, coordinate, and integrate program development, training, technology, and community outreach consistent with the objectives of the foot patrol and create evaluation criteria prior to implementation.
- Establish criteria for locating foot patrols in the community. Developing criteria such as identified community problems, unique needs, crime data, and special populations allows strategic deployment of resources in a proactive manner, rather than in response to incidents.
- Establish overarching program goals and objectives for implementing each foot patrol/beat location. Use foot patrols to improve community relations, suppress or prevent crime, or a combination of these objectives. Each objective is viable, yet requires a different approach and should be customized to the needs of the area.
- Establish baseline information on the foot patrol area to assist with developing strategies. An audit of the businesses, schools, social service agencies, parks, shopping areas, and other features in the specific foot patrol area allows the department to better understand areas that could benefit from the foot patrol and will assist with planning the community policing strategy.
- Establish focused areas for the implementation of foot patrols. Conduct a community survey to provide information on the community perceptions of safety needs that can be addressed through foot patrols. Most important, it allows community stakeholders to express ways through which they can support community and department priorities.

Once the overall strategy is developed, the department is in a position to shape the specific elements to be included in each foot patrol or beat.

Implementation

A foot patrol strategy needs to consider assignment of foot patrol locations, available staffing, resources, size of the beats, selection of officers to beats, and safety of the officers. To be successful, it is important that the foot patrol strategy is deployed on a permanent basis; therefore, a department must plan carefully to ensure that resources are not over committed.

The size of the foot patrol area has a direct impact on the goals and objectives of the foot patrols within a beat location. The area has to be small enough to allow an officer to patrol it several times during a shift. Larger beats in less-congested areas are suited for a combination of foot, bicycle, “park and walk,” or other personal transport systems to patrol the area effectively. Using a combination of patrol styles also allows an officer to cover more than one foot patrol location.

Successful foot patrols include more than just walking around. Specific planned programming and community engagement strategies must be incorporated into the process.

Community Engagement and Programming

Community stakeholders need to be active partners in the deployment of foot patrols. Training community members, businesses, and other stakeholders in crime prevention, environmental issues, neighborhood watch strategies, being effective witnesses, and problem solving will assist in reducing crime.

Stakeholders can contribute by taking action in the form of citizen patrols, graffiti eradication, youth programs, and trash removal. Other municipal agencies can assist with enforcing codes, developing youth programs, enhancing lighting, and removing visual barriers.

Officers assigned to foot patrols must have the training, resources, and support to develop and implement programs that address the specific needs of the beat area. Initiatives could include school presentations designed to curb underage drinking, physical security assessments to decrease the likelihood of crime, coordination of other departmental resources such as traffic or narcotics to address an identified problem, or supporting crime watch groups.

The significant obstacles to foot patrols have been the dwindling numbers of officers and an increase in the coverage area for which they are responsible. Foot patrols may be perceived by some departments as inefficient because vehicles cover more ground more quickly; however, the statement made to the community through a police presence on the street speaks of the investment being made in the safety of every resident. Business owners, patrons, and residents welcome an increased police presence in a community troubled by petty crime and vandalism.

The presence of foot patrols contributes to a feeling of safety. This is especially critical to areas undergoing revitalization and in areas with underserved populations. In addition to a safer community, foot patrols provide the officers with the best possible opportunity for understanding what goes on in the community. Technology has improved and officers are no longer tied to a

patrol car for radio access. The flexibility afforded by this form of patrol should be a consideration for every department as it assesses its resources and develops strategies for providing a powerful and coordinated response to crime. Incorporating foot patrols as part of a department's overarching strategy can bring changes in the community that would be unachievable through traditional vehicle patrol alone. Foot patrols have been critical to many communities across the country, strengthening the bonds between community members and officers while providing a coordinated effort to prevent and solve crime.

A foot patrol strategy that incorporates the planning elements discussed here will result in a cooperative effort between the community and the police and increase the quality of life within the community. This cooperative effort will also lead to a higher level of trust between the community and the police, more citizen involvement, and a community that starts to hold its members accountable.

- -Kym Craven
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