



*ARC Centre of Excellence
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Research Preview



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COMMUNITY POLICING AND CRIME PREVENTION IN OAKLAND, CA

by Associate Professor Jeremy Wilson

Background and Objectives

Increases in violent crime in the early 2000s caused a great deal of concern among Oakland, California (US), residents and policymakers. In response, in November 2004, Oakland voters passed a ballot measure that created the Violence Prevention and Public Safety Act (also known as Measure Y), which provides \$19.9 million per year for 10 years for violence-prevention programs, 63 new police officers focused on community and neighborhood policing services, and an independent evaluation of the measure.

This evaluation assessed Measure Y-funded community-policing efforts through September 2008. Specifically, the objective was two-fold. The first objective was to develop constructive lessons for improving the delivery and ultimate effectiveness of community policing by analyzing its form, substance, extent, and pace of implementation and to identify and highlight successes and challenges throughout the process. The second objective was to assess if and by how much community policing reduced crime by estimating the impact of the Oakland Police Department's problem-solving officer (PSO) deployment on neighborhood property and violent crime and by gauging stakeholder perceptions of PSO effectiveness.

The analysis relied on multiple sources of information: (1) a Web-based survey of PSOs; (2) an assessment of PSO deployment data used to summarize the deployment, stability, and coverage of the PSOs; (3) official crime statistics; and (4) semistructured interviews and focus

What is a PSO and what do they do?

A problem-solving officer (PSO) is a sworn police officer assigned solely to serve the residents of a beat to provide consistent contact and familiarity between residents and officers, continuity in problem solving and basic availability of police response in each neighborhood. Rather than respond to calls for service, PSOs establish partnerships and work with their neighborhood to identify and address its most salient crime and disorder problems. Typical problems range from drug sales, robbery and gang activity to blighted property, loitering and vandalism.

groups with Oakland Police Department PSOs and supervisors, neighborhood service coordinators, neighborhood crime prevention council leaders, and community policing advisory board members.

Key Findings

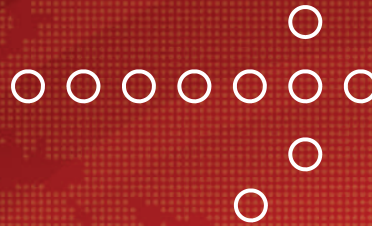
Much progress has been made in implementing the PSO program, but such progress has not been associated with a reduction in violent or property crime. Overall, there was no statistical evidence that the PSO program is associated with reductions in crime and violence. There are four possible explanations: (1) the program is not effective; (2) there are positive outcomes that the evaluation does not capture; (3) the program is associated with an increased propensity to report crime, thus off-setting crime reductions; or (4) implementation challenges preclude the program's ability to be effective. The final explanation—that implementation challenges may preclude the ability of the PSO program to demonstrate success (assuming that it is effective) at this point - seems

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the most probable. Despite much progress in the problem-solving unit, key implementation issues remain that could jeopardize problem-solving effectiveness: (1) the amount of problem-solving coverage that each beat receives, (2) the need for PSOs to “team up” on problem-solving in each other’s beats, (3) the number of problems a given PSO addresses at any one time (an average of 32), (4) limited collaboration outside OPD, and (5) the instability of PSO assignments.

A few management issues also surfaced that could hinder the implementation and ultimate effectiveness of the PSO program—issues that point to the incentives that PSOs perceive with regard to their positions. In particular, some PSOs do not feel that they are evaluated accurately, and some do not desire to remain in their current positions. The final management issue pertains to the fact that documentation of PSO efforts is not standard or consistent across geographic areas, which may impede the ability of PSO commanders to monitor PSO activities, thereby limiting their ability to oversee and facilitate their efforts while also raising questions about the ability of PSO commanders to evaluate PSOs consistently. It should also be noted that the effectiveness of individual PSOs will likely increase as they gain more PSO experience, particularly if they remain assigned to a single beat where they can build strong community partnerships. Those responding to the survey had, on average, about eight years of experience as police officers and two years of experience as PSOs.

Policy Implications

These findings suggest the following policy recommendations: (1) assess the adequacy of staffing to determine the extent to which OPD needs additional staff or whether some other kind of reallocation of

resources might improve problem-solving; (2) create a uniform problem tracking system and monitor problem-solving efforts to promote problem management and evaluation; (3) actively consider ways to stabilize the PSO assignments and work with communities to soften transitions when they occur; (4) maximize stakeholder involvement and the use of existing resources, given that community participation in the problem-solving

process continues to be less than ideal; (5) maximize incentives for PSOs with the goal of improving productivity and reducing attrition, thereby contributing to PSO stability, problem solving effectiveness, and improved police-community relations; and (6) find ways to leverage Measure Y dollars to equip the officers with vehicles as quickly as possible.

For More Information

The reports underpinning this research preview include:

Community Policing and Crime: The Process and Impact of Problem-solving in Oakland. Santa Monica, CA: RAND, TR-635-BPA, 2008. Available at: http://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/TR635/.

Community Policing and Violence Prevention in Oakland: Measure Y in Action. Santa Monica, CA: RAND, TR-546-BPA, 2007. Available at: http://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/TR546/.

Authors

Associate Professor Jeremy Wilson is Associate Director for Research at the School of Criminal Justice, Michigan State University. Dr. Wilson has collaborated with police agencies, communities, task forces, and governments throughout the U.S. and the world on many of the most salient public safety problems.

The views expressed in this Research Preview are those of the author and do not represent any official position of the Australian Research Council (ARC) Centre of Excellence in Policing and Security (CEPS).

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