

TELEMASP BULLETIN

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Downtown Policing: An Overview of Four Texas Cities

Introduction

This bulletin focuses on downtown policing efforts currently employed in Corpus Christi, El Paso, Houston and San Antonio. These particular Texas cities were selected for their contrasting environments, i.e., Corpus Christi is a resort with a downtown beach front; El Paso is an international border city; Houston has a large central business district; and San Antonio is noted for its river walk and night life. Although it was initially thought that variations in downtown characteristics might dictate different policing styles, the opposite was discovered. Each department used essentially the same patrol methods: foot, horse, bicycle, vehicle, and motorcycle.

Four commonalties existed among the departments:

- Morale among the foot, horse and bicycle patrol officers was very high.
- There was a great willingness for officers to pursue both law enforcement and community partnerships in solving crime and disorder problems.

- Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design was a major component in both downtown security planning and in reducing fear of crime among citizens.
- Most patrol time was free from calls for service. This enabled the foot, horse and bicycle patrol officers to focus on "soft crimes" (UCR Part II offenses) and directed patrol efforts.

After a brief background review of downtown policing, the policing efforts in the downtown areas of the four aforementioned cities will be examined.

Background

Despite its complexity, there is little literature regarding downtown policing. Only three studies, the Citizen's Commission on New York City (1985), Reiss (1985) and Trojanowicz and Harden (1985) focus specifically on policing downtown areas. One major issue discussed by the Citizen's Commission on New York City and Reiss was the importance of police departments concentrating on solving soft crimes (e.g., street drug use and sale, public intoxication, loitering, etc.), thereby reducing fear of crime among citizens.

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The Citizen's Commission on New York City found that while signs of physical deterioration (e.g., dilapidated buildings) had little effect on respondents' feelings of safety, soft crimes had a substantial impact on the expectations of more serious crimes occurring. Usually, in reducing fear of crime, efforts to improve physical deterioration are coupled with a focus on soft crime (Crowe, 1988; Krupat and Kubzansky, 1987; Levy, 1984; McKay, 1977; Reiss, 1985; Welke, 1977; Wilson and Kelling, 1982).

Soft crime. To address soft crime and provide normal police service, departments may employ a number of policing styles, according to Reiss (1985):

- Foot Patrol
- Mounted (Horse) Patrol
- Motorcycle Patrol
- Vehicle Patrol
- Cushman Golf Carts

These styles are utilized to increase police visibility, to make officers more approachable and to improve their mobility in congested downtown areas. With the exception of golf carts, each of the four cities visited employed at least two of the patrol techniques mentioned by Reiss, as well as a related technique—bicycles. All four departments reported these unconventional patrol methods to be effective in handling both soft crimes and UCR Part I offenses.

Morale. Although Trojanowicz and Harden (1985) did not focus solely on downtown policing, they did address community policing programs in downtown business districts. Their study of 143 U.S. and 13 foreign police departments found that 69 percent of the officers assigned to community policing were pleased with their assignments.

An important element of job satisfaction is effective problem solving. Because unconventional patrol techniques allow patrol officers more fre-

quent citizen contact, overlooked problems can be presented to officers for solutions. This leads to creativity in which unconventional problem solving becomes the norm. When officers receive positive results from their imaginative efforts and effective teamwork with public and private agencies, job satisfaction increases. Unconventional methods of patrol also provide officers with a clearer understanding of their area of responsibility.

Partnerships. When an officer is patrolling by vehicle with the windows up, a problem on the street may go unnoticed. On the other hand, if an officer is on foot patrol, problematic situations cannot easily be ignored or overlooked. If the situation is a reoccurring problem, the officer is likely to seek nontraditional solutions.

If supported by management, the officer can work with business owners and community residents to develop imaginative and effective remedies to problems. Trojanowicz and Harden (1985) found that with this type of partnership between officers, the community, and management, almost three-fourths of the officers in their study were pleased with their jobs.

Fear of crime. Among the Texas cities reviewed in this bulletin, UCR Part I crimes in the downtown areas have decreased. Although a direct cause-and-effect relationship between police efforts and reduction in crime is difficult to measure, crime rates did drop, and in some cases, substantially. However, even though crime rates drop, fear of crime in the downtown area must still be addressed.

Although foot patrol officers may not be as mobile or as quick to respond as those officers on vehicle patrol, the personal contact between officers and citizens provides a sense of well-being to visitors, merchants and residents. The impact of foot patrol on citizen fear is placed in a conceptual framework in the article, "Broken Windows," by Wilson and

Kelling (1982). In a five year study by Wilson and Kelling (1982) of neighborhoods served by foot patrol, it was found that although crime rates were not reduced, residents felt more secure. Residents tended to believe that crime had been reduced and they were more willing to travel city streets. The suppression of soft crime by foot patrol officers was posited as contributing to lessened citizen fear of serious crime. Wilson and Kelling contend that perceptions of disorder arise from minor "incivilities," which like broken windows, litter or high grass are linked to crime. In areas where unattended property becomes the target of destruction or unattended behavior is not kept in check, a sense of community control is lost and replaced with the idea that "no one cares." This may result in neighborhood residents moving out leaving no informal control to keep panhandlers, prostitutes or drunks from frequenting the streets.

Corpus Christi (Population: 257,453)

The heart of downtown Corpus Christi faces east toward the Corpus Christi Bay. The area is clean, well-maintained and bustling with tourism and businesses. The Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design concept of territoriality and natural surveillance is a major component in reducing crime. The downtown area which extends about four blocks west from the beach is surrounded with hotels, restaurants, shops, and business offices. The Corpus Christi Police Department relocated into a downtown building approximately three years ago. According to Commander Don Dixon of the department's Uniform Division, downtown Corpus Christi looked very different 15 years ago.

The central business district is divided into "uptown" and "downtown." In 1980, a major revitalization effort was launched downtown to generate business and tourism. In partnership with the revitalization effort, the Corpus Christi P. D. instituted a downtown Walking Motor Patrol.

The Walking Motor Patrol consists of two shifts (7:00 a.m.—3:00 p.m. and 3:00 p.m.—11:00 p.m.) with two officers patrolling each tour. These officers are not dispatched to calls-for-service since they focus on soft crime and downtown community relations. Calls-for-service are handled by one officer per shift who is on regular vehicle patrol. Six bicycle patrol officers (3 day shift and 3 evening shift) augment the Walking Motor Patrol's efforts to reduce soft crime and direct patrol. The officers interviewed all appeared to enjoy their jobs. Officer A. J. Serrano, a 25-year veteran, commented that when he is at work, it is "more than just handling problems; it's as if our friends are having problems." Although a productive partnership has been established with the business community, the Corpus Christi P. D. does not use private funds to purchase equipment for either the Walking Motor Patrol or the bicycle patrol.

Because downtown Corpus Christi is small, it is incorporated into a larger beat for UCR reporting purposes. Although official Part I crime statistics for the downtown were unavailable, there has been a decrease in the past three years.

El Paso (Population: 515,342)

The downtown district of El Paso consists primarily of daytime businesses. There is some nighttime entertainment, but there are few clubs and the crowds are small. The El Paso Police Department's Metro Section is responsible for patrolling the downtown area from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Established in 1993, Metro consists of foot patrol, bicycle patrol, an undercover unit and parking and traffic enforcement. Metro's 42 officers include one lieutenant, four sergeants, eight parking enforcement controllers, four three-wheel motorcycle officers, four vehicle patrol officers, thirteen foot patrol officers, and eight bicycle patrol officers.



Since these units have been consolidated, auto theft, burglary, robbery, theft and assault have decreased by 27 percent in the downtown area. In 1993, El Paso experienced a devaluation of the Mexican peso and increased border patrol efforts which significantly affected the downtown policing district. While devaluation of the peso sharply reduced the number of visitors from Mexico spending money in El Paso, the stepped-up border patrol efforts reduced illegal aliens in the city by an estimated 80 percent.

In September of 1993, the U. S. Border Patrol initiated a security program in the El Paso area termed "Hold The Line." Agents are stationed 300 to 400 yards apart on the border 24 hours-a-day, 7 days-a-week. One border patrol agent estimated that the "Hold The Line" program reduced the rate of illegal aliens in El Paso from 1,200 to 200 per day. With the Mexican border less than a mile-and-a-half from the center of downtown El Paso, there is a substantial impact on the downtown population. Although the influx of persons from Juarez has recently been reduced, there is still much activity in the downtown area. For example, at the corner of Oregon and Paisano there is a daily open-air market where goods are available for purchase or trade. The orderly and clean area is alive with crowded activity. At this "swap-meet," two important elements of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design include natural surveillance by the large number of people and territoriality exhibited by the cluster of merchants.

Partnerships are actively pursued by the El Paso Police Department through regular meetings with business leaders in the downtown area. Bicycles and bike equipment are donated by downtown organizations.

Metro Section personnel are distributed equally throughout the area. Foot patrol, bicycle patrol and the undercover unit focus on soft crime and directed patrol initiatives. All calls-for-service are the responsibility of vehicle patrol. Information

on problem areas is through direct observation, crime analysis, and citizen interaction.

Houston (Population: 1,630,553)

The Special Operations Division of the Houston Police Department is responsible for policing the downtown area. Since 1990, this 134-officer unit has been instrumental in reducing UCR Part I crimes by 58 percent. A number of initiatives have contributed to this accomplishment.

In 1990, the Houston Police Department reconfigured patrol in the downtown area to better address the environmental make-up of the city. A 44 square block area referred to as the "Main Street Corridor" runs through the center of the city. This central business district is used by the city bus service, Houston Metro, which transfers 75,000 people each week day. The Special Operations Division uses both foot patrol and vehicle patrol in this area. In the southern section of downtown, containing a large number of surface parking lots, bicycle officers patrol with great success.

Two prominent features characterizing the east and far north side of downtown Houston are the George R. Brown Convention Center and a large warehouse district. These areas are patrolled predominately by vehicle and mounted patrol officers. On the west side of downtown, where the theater district, public library, and City Hall are located, mounted patrol officers are utilized. Although the downtown is divided into four areas, police units are integrated throughout downtown with directed patrol.

In 1994, the Special Operations Division set a goal to commit 50 percent of all patrol time to directed patrol activities. On a daily basis, supervisors receive and find solutions to problems. Problems are identified through crime analysis, citizen interaction and officer observation. Both proactive law enforcement approaches (e.g., Hi-Rise Surveillance, Sting Operations, and Zero Tolerance) and partnerships with residents and businesses are



employed to address crime problems. The success of these techniques is measured by the drastic reduction of UCR Part I crimes, high level of officer morale and reduction of fear of crime in the downtown area.

In a 1994 survey conducted by the Houston Downtown Management Corporation, it was found that 59 percent of the respondents considered the downtown image to be better than it was in the previous two years. More than one-half of the respondents surveyed said environmental conditions were better, 52 percent felt more secure downtown, and 79 percent thought that police visibility was better or much better.

Although a scientific effort was not employed to measure morale, a sense of enthusiasm and pride was displayed by all management and rank-and-file officers interviewed. It was pointed out that the Special Operations Division attempts to recruit cadets from the police academy. This division also conducts a formal five-day orientation program for all new officers in the Special Operations Division.

San Antonio (Population: 935,933)

Forty-six foot and bicycle patrol officers of the San Antonio Police Department provide service for the central downtown business district. This district includes a large number of entertainment, hotel and restaurant facilities located around San Antonio's famed "river walk."

For almost as long as there has been a downtown area in San Antonio, foot patrol officers have patrolled the area. In the late 1980s, foot patrol was combined with bicycle patrol and since 1990, UCR Part I Offenses have decreased by 44 percent.

Downtown San Antonio is divided into eight areas where foot and bicycle officers patrol anywhere within these parameters. Operating on two shifts (10:00 a.m.—6:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m.—2:00 a.m.)

the foot and bicycle patrol officers focus on soft crime and directed patrol efforts. They are not dispatched to calls-for-service. Park rangers, organized as a separate unit, are responsible for all class C misdemeanors occurring along the river walk.

The foot and bicycle patrol was visited during the second shift shortly after midnight. Without exception, each officer interviewed exhibited a great amount of enthusiasm and professionalism. Jerry Rabourn, a 28-year veteran, said he enjoyed bicycle patrol because of "the contact with the people and the exercise." This comment is typical of the attitudes expressed by bicycle patrol officers interviewed in each city.

Lieutenant Harry Griffen of the foot and bicycle patrol related that the partnerships formed with downtown development groups and the home owner's association have been very positive. In its eight years of existence, fiscal year 1995 will mark the first year that expenditures have been budgeted for bicycle patrol. Previously, all bicycles and equipment were donated by private organizations. This partnership has helped to foster an environment that is expected to bring in 60 new million dollar businesses.

Strategies of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design were evident in San Antonio's downtown area. The district was clean and well-lighted with a large number of people on the streets during late hours. This high pedestrian traffic denotes a low level of fear of crime. One officer stated that juvenile gang members have told him that they come downtown because it is safer than their neighborhoods.

Downtowns in Smaller Jurisdictions

Many of the approaches employed in large jurisdictions can also be used in smaller towns. Although equestrian patrol may be out of the question, other personalized techniques are not. For example, in Lewisville (population 46,521), the





downtown area known as "Old Town" is actively involved in the beginning stages of a revitalization effort. Chief Steve H. McFadden is planning to develop a sub-station operation in "Old Town." In addition, an experimental community-oriented policing project in this area has been initiated.

In 1993, the Lewisville Police Department assigned two Neighborhood Resource Officers to

District Four, which includes "Old Town." These officers handle regular calls-for-service, but they also enlist both proactive and co-active approaches to problems. While the experiment is still underway, preliminary information is very encouraging. From January through September 1994, calls-for-service decreased in District Four by 17 percent and during the first three quarters of 1994, criminal offenses decreased by 4 percent.

POLICING THE DOWNTOWN DISTRICT SEMINAR

April 3-4, 1995

On April 3, 1995, the Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas conducted a day-and-a-half seminar on "Policing the Downtown District." Seventeen participants from 10 departments in Texas discussed the successes and the problems they were experiencing in their downtown areas. Some of the more common problems occurring downtown included:

- Transients
- Aggressive "panhandlers"
- Large unruly crowds on weekend nights
- Gangs
- Media portraying downtown as dangerous

Although many suggestions were offered and discussed, it was evident that there is no easy remedy to the problems of downtown policing. Political, economical and cultural issues weigh heavy on police service and must be considered before any plan of action can take place. Some of the more effective and imaginative resolutions are presented below.

- To assist downtown visitors and serve as "eyes and ears" for the police department, the Austin Police Department employs college students in the "Downtown Ranger" program. Other efforts to improve police service and the downtown image include use of officers on light-duty in Hi-rise Surveillance, downtown newsletters, holding roll-calls in business locations, displaying art work on the first floor of vacant buildings and establishing a special taxing district for improving downtown.
- In Corpus Christi and other cities, consumption of alcohol downtown by minors and transients is controlled by a glass container ordinance.
- To curb gang warfare and teenage crime, Dallas has enacted a downtown curfew.
- Ft. Worth reported "Zero Tolerance" efforts were very effective in handling late night crowds. In addition, to enhance reporting efforts, private security firms have a radio channel to contact the Ft. Worth Police Department.
- In an effort to control the downtown transient population, Houston is in the process of offering a pavilion for the homeless on the east side of town. This structure would not only offer protection from the elements but would also provide more security for the transient population.



The following individuals participated in the seminar on policing the downtown district. Each of these participants have agreed to serve as a point of contact for any agency wishing to learn more about downtown policing efforts. Their contribution to the creation of this bulletin is sincerely appreciated.

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Corpus Christi Police Department

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Galveston Police Department

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Houston Police Department

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Lubbock Police Department

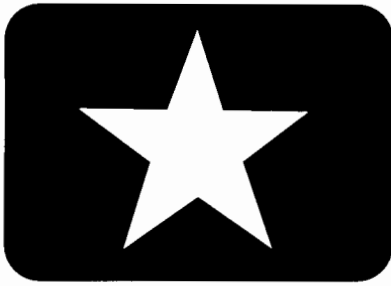
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San Antonio Police Department

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