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Tactical Patrol: A Synopsis

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The John F. Finn Institute for Public Safety, Inc., is an independent, not-for-profit and non-partisan corporation, whose work is dedicated to the development of criminal justice strategies, programs, and practices that are effective, lawful, and procedurally fair, through the application of social science findings and methods. The Institute conducts social research on matters of public safety and security – crime, public disorder, and the management of criminal justice agencies and partnerships – in collaboration with municipal, county, state, and federal criminal justice agencies, and for their direct benefit. The findings of the Institute’s research are also disseminated through other media to criminal justice professionals, academicians, elected public officials, and other interested parties, so that those findings may contribute to a broader body of knowledge about criminal justice and to the practical application of those findings in other settings.

The Finn Institute was established in 2007, building on a set of collaborative projects and relationships with criminal justice agencies dating to 1998. The first of those projects, for which we partnered with the Albany Police Department (APD), was initiated by John Finn, who was at that time the sergeant who commanded the APD’s Juvenile Unit. Later promoted to lieutenant and assigned to the department’s Administrative Services Bureau, he spearheaded efforts to implement problem-oriented policing, and to develop an institutional capability for analysis that would support problem-solving. The APD’s capacity for applying social science methods and results thereupon expanded exponentially, based on Lt. Finn’s appreciation for the value of research, his keen aptitude for analysis, and his vision of policing, which entailed the formulation of proactive, data-driven, and – as needed – unconventional strategies to address problems of public safety. Lt. Finn was fatally shot in the line of duty in 2003. The Institute that bears his name honors his life and career by fostering the more effective use of research and analysis within criminal justice agencies, just as Lt. Finn did in the APD.

Introduction

Tactical patrol entails an increase in enforcement resources and activity, for a finite period of time, with a geographic focus – that is, targeting “hot spots” of crime – and (typically) an offense focus. Sometimes called directed patrol and sometimes called a police crackdown, interventions based on one or another variation of this theme have enjoyed demonstrable effectiveness.¹ Their common elements are these:

- They are proactive and aggressive.
- Officers use their uncommitted time to engage in purposeful activity.
- Officers have specific instructions directing their activities.
- These instructions (“directions”) are based on thorough analyses of crime data.²

However, we do not believe that any variant would be equally effective in any setting, and extant research does not suffice to guide the application of specific forms of tactical patrol to specific crime or disorder problems. Tactical patrol varies in the breadth of its geographic focus and the nature of its offense focus, in its enforcement content, and in its intensity or “dosage,” duration, and repetition. In this brief report, we summarize the components of tactical patrol and the operational options among which police managers may choose in designing a tactical patrol intervention, we review the evidence on effectiveness, and we offer some guidance about the steps of implementation.

Operational Components

Geographic and Offense Focus

The National Research Council’s Committee to Review Research on Police Policy and Practices concluded, after a thorough review of the extant literature, that a strong body of evidence supports a focused geographical approach to crime problems.³ The geographic focus of tactical patrol initiatives has been as narrow as a street block or intersection, and as broad as an entire city, or more intermediate dimensions of a patrol beat or two. Moreover, the population density and land usage within target areas can vary greatly. Within these areas, tactical patrol might focus on drunk driving, prostitution, drug sales, firearm offenses, or more generally, street crime or disorder.

Minneapolis police targeted “small clusters of addresses” that generated many calls for service. Each hot spot accounted for at least 20 calls for “hard crime” in a one-year period; no such hot spot was larger than one standard street block, and none of the hot spots extended more than one half block from any intersection.⁴ These were, then, very narrowly circumscribed geographic targets, which were further culled to concentrate on targets at which crime and

¹ We credit Gary W. Cordner and Dennis J. Kenney for coining the term tactical patrol to encompass operations to which different labels have been attached in spite of their operational parallels. See their “Tactical Patrol Evaluation” in Larry T. Hoover (ed.), *Police Program Evaluation* (Washington: PERF, 1998).

² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³ National Research Council, *Fairness and Effectiveness in Policing: The Evidence*, Committee to Review Research on Police Policy and Practices, Wesley Skogan and Kathleen Frydl (eds.) (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2004), chap. 6.

⁴ Lawrence W. Sherman and David Weisburd, “General Deterrent Effects of Police Patrol in Crime ‘Hot Spots’: A Randomized, Controlled Trial,” *Justice Quarterly* 12 (1995), p. 625.

disorder occurred in public, and hence was presumably deterrable by a visible police presence. The Jersey City police targeted “violent crime places” that were of a geographic scope comparable to Minneapolis’ hot spots: intersections and the area encompassed by adjoining street segments.⁵

By contrast, Washington DC police implemented a drug crackdown called Operation Clean Sweep in the 1980s, which targeted drug markets city-wide.⁶ Crackdowns on street-level drug markets in Lynn and Lawrence, Massachusetts, focused on one or several fairly small areas in those cities.⁷ Intensified drug enforcement in Detroit, during the height of that city’s crack epidemic, targeted areas of approximately one and one half square miles, each of which was home to multiple street-level drug markets.⁸

When Kansas City police implemented directed gun patrols, they did so in a selected patrol beat, which was 0.64 square mile in size.⁹ Indianapolis police likewise applied a directed gun patrol intervention in two target areas (2.79 and 1.69 square miles in size, respectively), each of which encompassed two patrol beats.¹⁰ Gun patrols in Syracuse have targeted several discrete hot spots that together comprise 1.47 square miles.¹¹ Dayton police intensified traffic enforcement in a target area comprised of a high-volume traffic artery 1.9 miles in length.¹² A “crackdown” on illegal parking and disorder was applied in the Georgetown area of the District of Columbia, an area which we estimate to be approximately 0.40 square mile in size.¹³

While we can detect no correlation between the geographic size of the targeted area and the success of tactical patrol operations, we take as a premise that effectiveness is at least partly a function of the size of the target area(s) relative to the patrol resources committed to tactical patrol, and hence the intensity of the intervention, as we discuss below. Target areas should, therefore, be defined with reference to available resources.

⁵ The Jersey City intervention, however, consisted of more than only tactical patrol. See Anthony Braga, David L. Weisburd, Elin J. Waring, Lorraine Green Mazerolle, William Spelman, and Francis Gajewski, “Problem-Oriented Policing in Violent Crime Places: A Randomized Controlled Experiment,” *Criminology* 37 (1999): 541-580.

⁶ See Lawrence W. Sherman “Police Crackdowns: Initial and Residual Deterrence,” in Michael Tonry and Norval Morris (eds.), *Crime and Justice: A Review of Research*, Vol. 12 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 22-23.

⁷ Mark A.R. Kleiman, “Crackdowns: The Effects of Intensive Enforcement on Retail Heroin Dealing,” in Marcia R. Chaiken (ed.), *Street-Level Drug Enforcement: Examining the Issues* (Washington: National Institute of Justice, 1988).

⁸ Timothy S. Bynum and Robert E. Worden, *Police Drug Crackdowns: An Evaluation of Implementation and Effects*, Report to the National Institute of Justice (East Lansing, Mich.: School of Criminal Justice, Michigan State University, 1996).

⁹ Lawrence W. Sherman and Dennis P. Rogan, “The Effects of Gun Seizures on Gun Violence: ‘Hot Spots’ Patrol in Kansas City,” *Justice Quarterly* 12 (1995): 673-693.

¹⁰ Edmund F. McGarrell, Steven Chermak, Alexander Weiss, and Jeremy Wilson, “Reducing Firearms Violence Through Directed Police Patrol,” *Criminology and Public Policy* 1 (2001): 119-148.

¹¹ Robert E. Worden, Sarah J. McLean, MoonSun Kim, and Heidi S. Bonner, *Deterring Gun Violence: Onondaga County’s Highway Gun Interdiction Details*, Report to the Onondaga County IMPACT Executive Committee (Albany: John F. Finn Institute, 2008).

¹² Alexander Weiss and Sally Freels, “The Effects of Aggressive Policing: The Dayton Traffic Enforcement Experiment,” *American Journal of Police* 15:3 (1996): 45-64.

¹³ Sherman, “Police Crackdowns,” *op. cit.*, pp. 15-18.

Enforcement Content

Tactical patrol might consist of simple police presence and visibility, as it did in Minneapolis, though it more commonly involves proactive enforcement efforts: traffic enforcement, field stops and interrogations, disorder or “quality-of-life” policing that attends to minor offenses, depending on the nature of the target areas and offenses. In general, greater police visibility is achieved through citizen contacts, and that is associated with crime reductions more than simply increasing police presence.¹⁴ These enforcement actions can be undertaken by regularly assigned patrol units, directed toward targeted areas and targeted offenses based on the results of crime analysis, or they can (in addition or instead) be performed by one or more dedicated units, freed from the responsibility to respond to calls for service. Tactical patrol directed at street-level drug markets in Richmond, Virginia, included regular patrol supplemented by greatly enhanced levels of specialized patrol units in the area, which delivered a mix of proactive police activity – namely, field interviews, arrests of street drug dealers, citations, and code enforcement.¹⁵

We would note that enforcement content can vary in subtle respects that may bear on the effectiveness of the intervention. Indianapolis police applied two forms of directed gun patrols: one form provided for markedly increased contact with all citizens through traffic enforcement, making large numbers of stops with limited intrusiveness; a second form provided for stopping only those individuals suspected of involvement in crime. The latter form of patrol yielded fewer contacts with citizens and fewer citations, including both traffic and pedestrian stops during which officers made more “thorough, focused investigation”; the officers made nearly three times as many arrests for every 100 stops, and it was only this form that was associated with reductions in violent crime.¹⁶ In general, the success of place-based strategies may be enhanced when applied in conjunction with an offender-based focus.

Intensity, Duration, and Repetition

The intensity of tactical patrol varies with respect to the number of officers deployed and for how many hours per shift, day, or week, absolutely and relative to the size of the targeted area; intensity might also vary with respect to the magnitude of the increase in enforcement activity or outputs that are generated. Minneapolis’ hot spots patrols were designed to deliver a total of three hours of police presence in targeted hot spots each day, though in practice, the level of

¹⁴ Gary W. Cordner, “The effects of directed patrol: A natural quasi-experiment in Pontiac,” in James Fyfe (ed.), *Contemporary Issues in Law Enforcement* (Beverly Hills, Cal: Sage, 1981). Weiss and Freels, “The Effects of Aggressive Policing,” *op. cit.*

¹⁵ Michael R. Smith, “Police-led Crackdowns and Cleanups: An Evaluation of a Crime Control Initiative in Richmond, Virginia,” *Crime & Delinquency* 47 (2001): 60-83.

¹⁶ Edmund F. McGarrell, Steven Chermak, and Alexander Weiss, *Reducing Gun Violence: Evaluation of the Indianapolis Police Department’s Directed Patrol Project* (Washington: NIJ, 2002), p. 8. Also see Gordon P. Whitaker, Charles David Phillips, Peter J. Haas, and Robert E. Worden, “Aggressive Policing and the Deterrence of Crime,” *Law & Policy* 7 (1985): 395-416; this analysis finds that stops based on suspicion have crime reduction effects. We would note that a tactical patrol operation in Syracuse, which resembles the more traffic enforcement oriented patrol in Indianapolis, has been effective in reducing shootings in that city. We attribute its success to its scale, providing for three times (or more) the intensity of the Indianapolis intervention. See Worden, et al., *Deterring Gun Violence*, *op. cit.*

presence fell short of that objective.¹⁷ Dedicated gun patrols in Kansas City – two two-officer units, working 7 p.m. until 1 a.m. seven days a week – entailed 243 manhours per week per square mile, on average; these patrols produced 241.6 traffic tickets and 136.5 arrests per 1,000 manhours.¹⁸ The effective form of gun patrols in Indianapolis delivered 153.6 manhours per week, or 55 manhours per week per square mile, and these patrols produced 611.6 traffic tickets and 219.8 arrests per 1,000 manhours.

The duration of evaluated interventions has varied widely. Patrols in Indianapolis were maintained for nearly thirteen weeks; in Kansas City, gun patrols were deployed for twenty-nine weeks. Traffic enforcement was maintained in Dayton for six months. Gun patrols in Syracuse have been maintained, on and off, for over four years. Drug crackdowns in Detroit were sustained over six months, though the intensity decayed over that time, and a more optimal duration would have been much shorter – no more than one month.

Sherman theorizes that tactical patrol could be most effectively (and efficiently) applied dynamically, with a series of intermittent crackdowns, of brief duration, repeated at unannounced and unpredictable intervals in any one target area.¹⁹ In this way, Sherman argues, the initial deterrence of the crackdown is followed by a “free bonus” of residual deterrence during the “backoff”: unaware that tactical patrol operations have been discontinued, offenders remain deterred by the elevated risk of apprehension that they believe still holds. Applying tactical patrol intermittently in this way in any one target area, patrol resources could be rotated among target areas, resuming operations in any one area as needed when residual deterrence decays.

Outcomes

Published evaluations of tactical patrol have yielded mostly favorable results (though unpublished evaluations and unevaluated interventions might have been less successful). Moreover, research further indicates that these reductions in crime and disorder can be achieved without displacing crime to other areas and can, in fact, result in the diffusion of crime control benefits to areas surrounding the target areas.²⁰ The effects are in some instances limited to the targeted offenses – directed gun patrols, for example, affected only violent crime, and not property crime – and the effects may be subject to decay over time.

The evaluation of the “hot spots” patrols in Minneapolis, Minnesota, suggests that “substantial increases merely in police patrol presence can indeed cause modest reductions in crime and more impressive reductions in disorder within high-crime locations.”²¹ Field interrogations in San Diego reduced robberies. The evaluation of directed patrol by Indianapolis police found that targeted directed patrol, emphasizing contacts with people suspected of involvement in violent crime, can significantly reduce violent crime. The experience in Kansas City, Missouri was similar: focusing directed patrols to known gun-crime hot spots coupled with field interviews, door-to-door solicitation of tips, and other heightened police activity in the target areas led to a

¹⁷ Sherman and David Weisburd, “General Deterrent Effects of Police Patrol in Crime ‘Hot Spots,’” *op. cit.*, p. 634.

¹⁸ Sherman and Rogan, “The Effects of Gun Seizures on Gun Violence,” *op. cit.*, pp. 678, 680.

¹⁹ Sherman “Police Crackdowns,” *op. cit.*, especially pp. 7-14. Also see Michael S. Scott, *The Benefits and Consequences of Police Crackdowns* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2003).

²⁰ National Research Council, *Fairness and Effectiveness in Policing*, *op. cit.*

²¹ Sherman and Weisburd, “General Deterrent Effects of Police Patrol in Crime ‘Hot Spots,’” *op. cit.*, p. 625.

reduction in gun crime in the target area during the intervention period. Furthermore, this intensified enforcement need not antagonize the community.²² The Richmond, Virginia, operation against street drug markets produced a decline in violent Part I crime during the intervention period.²³ The Lynn drug crackdown was effective; a crackdown in Lawrence was not, and the Detroit drug crackdowns achieved only modest effects on drug markets and none on predatory crime. Intensified traffic enforcement in Dayton was ineffective.

Putting Research into Practice

Tactical patrol is based on analyses of crime and disorder, and the first order of business is to formulate an offense focus that would direct the analysis. If, for example, violent crime is the target offense, then analysis should concentrate on (non-domestic) homicide and aggravated assault, robbery, and perhaps criminal possession of a weapon. If gun crime is the target offense, then analysis should be more narrowly drawn around the subsets of those same offense categories that involved a firearm. The ensuing analysis should encompass at least the most recent twelve months of targeted crimes, which will yield geographic and temporal patterns that underlie week-to-week and month-to-month fluctuations.

The analysis should be conducted in a way that allows for the identification of small, stable hot spots – that is, areas of approximately one to four blocks in size, like those identified in Jersey City and Minneapolis, which allow for the most intensive targeting of enforcement resources. If crime is concentrated in such contained pockets, then those areas would serve as the foci of tactical patrol, providing for brief, intermittent, intensified proactive enforcement.

We believe that dedicated patrols would be likely to yield the greatest increase in enforcement activity and police visibility. Depending on the number and size of target areas, two or three two-officer units deployed at key times for at least five days, concentrating on a few narrowly circumscribed hot spots, could be expected to alter would-be offenders' perceptions of risk. That is all the more likely, we believe, if their efforts were based on not only spatial and temporal analyses of crime but also on field intelligence and other information on the offenders at the highest risk of perpetrating the target offense(s). Like the patrols in Indianapolis, patrols should concentrate primarily on high-risk people in high-risk places, focusing on suspicious behavior (and not traffic infractions), with probing, thorough investigations of those people. They could also, as time permits, provide for the control of social disorder or "incivilities," as several interventions (such as that in Jersey City) have.²⁴

Tactical patrol on this scale, and directed toward hot spots of small dimensions, could be rotated from one set of target areas to another set after a brief intervention, as brief as a week. Crime levels within target areas should be monitored on a weekly basis, and preparations made to repeat – albeit perhaps for only a few days – operations in a target area from which tactical patrol has been withdrawn (as residual deterrent effects decay).

²² James W. Shaw, "Community Policing Against Guns: Public Opinion of the Kansas City Gun Experiment," *Justice Quarterly* 12 (1995): 695-710; Steven Chermak, Edmund F. McGarrell, and Alexander Weiss, "Citizens' Perceptions of Aggressive Traffic Enforcement Strategies," *Justice Quarterly* 18 (2001): 365-391.

²³ Smith, "Police-led Crackdowns and Cleanups," *op. cit.*

²⁴ In Jersey City's initiative to reduce violent crime, one of the more common tactics was "aggressive order maintenance." See Braga, et al., "Problem-Oriented Policing in Violent Crime Places," *op. cit.*, p. 554.