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CITIZEN CONTACT PATROL:

THE HOUSTON FIELD TEST

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

by

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Final Report  
to the  
National Institute of Justice

The Honorable James K. Stewart, Director

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CITIZEN CONTACT PATROL

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## SUMMARY

This report summarizes a field test conducted by the Houston Police Department in collaboration with the Police Foundation under a grant from the National Institute of Justice. The test examined the impact of police officers initiating informal personal contacts with citizens, mostly at residences, as well as in businesses, streets and parking lots. In one small area, police made face-to-face personal contacts equal to some 14 percent of the population and 37 percent of the occupied housing units. The contacts were brief, friendly efforts to get acquainted and solicit citizen views about local problems. In the process of making the contacts, police increased their presence in the program area.

After ten months of Citizen Contact Patrol in 1983-84, the evaluation found that residents in the Citizen Contact neighborhood, as compared to those in a matched area where no new programs were introduced, had significantly ( $p \leq .05$ ) lower levels of property crime victimization, fear of crime, perceptions of personal and property crime as big problems in the neighborhood, perceptions of disorder in the area, and estimations of police aggressiveness. Persons exposed to the program reported significantly higher satisfaction with the area and with police service. As implemented in Houston, Citizen Contact Patrol appears to be an effective way to reduce victimization and fear, and to improve public attitudes toward police.

### THE CITIZEN CONTACT PATROL PROGRAM

After a process of competitive bidding, the National Institute of Justice awarded the Police Foundation a grant to evaluate police programs aimed at

reducing public fear of crime. The grant supported a joint planning process by the Houston Police Department and the Police Foundation, as well as similar efforts in Newark, New Jersey. The goal of the planning process was to select a set of police strategies that had a good chance of reducing public fear of crime, could be implemented and evaluated within one year, and could be implemented citywide (if successful) without increased numbers of police. Since N.I.J. funds were available to do before and after surveys of five demographically matched neighborhoods, four areas were allocated to receive the various strategies to be tested while the fifth area was designated a comparison site where no new programs were implemented.

The problem of personal contact with citizens was raised by the Houston Police Department's Fear Reduction Task Force as an acute issue in Houston's 565 low-density square miles. The task force examined a directed police contact program in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and met with officers conducting a similar program in Oakland, California. The planning group agreed to test Citizen Contact Patrol in one of the four program areas.

#### Program Organization

Two officers from the task force met with all the other officers working in the citizen contact area. The two lead officers explained that one officer on each shift would be assigned exclusively to the program area and would be responsible for the contacts during that shift. Each contact would be recorded on a Citizen Contact Card and filed with the record keeper/coordinator. Most important, while working on this assignment, the citizen contact officer

would not be dispatched to calls outside of the program area. All of these plans appear to have been fully implemented.

### Program Area

The program was tested in a one-square mile area, constituting one third of a patrol beat, which had 3106 persons in 1390 households as of the 1980 Census. As Table 1 shows, the populations of both the program and comparison areas were about half minority groups and half white, and were fairly transient. The program area had two distinct residential patterns: small single-family detached houses and low-rise apartment buildings. The program area's 155 commercial establishments were all on the area's perimeter, on major thoroughfares.

The "before" survey of program area residents showed that they did not have high levels of fear, even though in national terms they did suffer a relatively high level of crime victimization. They were not accustomed to high levels of police contact; about one third thought they had seen an officer in the area in the past 24 hours, but another third could not recall having seen an officer in the previous week. (This appears to have been about the same level of police visibility that existed in Kansas City prior to the preventive patrol experiment there. See Kelling, Pate, et al., 1974, p. 38).

### Number of Contacts

The number of contacts actually made could not be described as a burden that would interfere with performing normal patrol duties. The most active

TABLE 1  
1983 DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF PROGRAM AND COMPARISON AREAS

Characteristic	Percentage in:	
	Program Area	Comparison Area
Sex		
Males	46	52
Females	54	48
Race		
Black	24	20
White	41	55
Hispanic	33	24
Other	2	1
Housing		
Own	41	40
Rent	59	60
Education		
Not high school	39	46
High school graduate	61	54
Income		
Under \$15,000	53	46
Over \$15,000	47	54
Age		
15-24	19	16
25-49	55	50
50-98	26	34
Marital Status		
Single	42	47
Married*	58	53
Employment		
Work full or part-time	62	66
Other	38	34
Length of Residence		
0-2 years	47	47
3-5 years	20	16
6-9 years	9	7
10+ years	24	30

\*Includes "living with someone as partner."

Source: Wave 1 Area Surveys

month of the program was September, 1983, shortly after it began. In that month, police made 92 personal contacts, or about three per day and one per shift. The numbers declined thereafter, for a total of about 500 contacts over ten months, or 50 per month, 1.5 per day, or one every other shift. The observed contacts took about three to six minutes, and rarely as much as ten minutes. Given the substantial amounts of uncommitted patrol time in almost every American police department, adding this level of personal contact seems quite feasible.

About half the contacts were made on the 2:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. shift, the most likely time to find residents at home and for retail businesses to be open. This was also when the officer who helped plan the strategy, who made 47 percent of total contacts, was working. (Four other officers each made 10 to 25 percent of the contacts, and five relief officers each made about two percent.) Officers on other shifts found it difficult to find non-threatening situations in which to approach residents. In all, police made 427 personal contacts with program area residents, and 73 contacts with representatives of businesses and other non-residential locations.

#### Nature of Contacts

Most of the encounters with both residents (73%) and others (68%) were "proactive," or initiated by the police officer. Of the contacts with residents, 79 percent were conducted at homes, 9 percent were with citizens who were walking in the area, and 9 percent were with people who were driving cars or trucks in the area, mostly in or near the parking lots of local apartment complexes.

In addition to analyzing the Citizen Contact Card which the officers filled out for each contact, the evaluation monitored the contacts through direct observation by a civilian Police Foundation staff member. She attempted observations on a random sampling basis, but it was not always possible to follow that schedule. She observed 40 contacts, about 8 percent of the total, and never witnessed a negative response by a citizen. Ten percent of the responses were neutral and 90 percent appeared quite positive. Both citizens and police were generally friendly, relaxed and cooperative. The observer judged only two contacts, both made by nervous rookies, as "poor."

The contacts typically began with the officers introducing themselves, explaining that they worked in the area and were trying to become more familiar with local people and their problems. They asked for a few minutes of time and then asked if there was any problem in the neighborhood the citizen wanted police to know about. The officer recorded the problem on the contact card, told the person what might be done about the problem, and usually left a business card so the person could, if necessary, later contact the officer directly.

#### Styles of Contacts

The style of the contacts varied both among officers and with each officer according to mood. There were a few occasions when no business card was left, when the officer suggested no solutions to problems, or when the officer failed to make the purpose of the contact clear at the beginning of the conversation. The observer judged the latter contacts as least successful and most likely to make citizens nervous.

### Newsletters

After contact, the officer placed the citizen's name on the mailing list to receive a police neighborhood newsletter (see Pate et al., 1985). Depending on how early in the program the citizens were contacted, the contacted citizen received from zero to five newsletters before the "post-program" survey was conducted.

### Citizen Problems and Follow-up

Table 2 shows the characteristics of those citizens contacted by the officers. These citizens identified a wide range of problems, from domestic violence and child abuse to vehicle crime and burglary. The officers' most common response was to tell citizens that police were now spending more time patrolling the area and to call the officer directly if the problem recurred. For some problems the police took direct action, such as advising landlords on building security. If citizens whom they advised to call another city agency about a problem called back to say the agency had done nothing, the officers sometimes called the agency themselves. We do not know how many arrests resulted from citizen supplied information, but there were at least some. The most productive officer said that his approximately 200 contacts produced many informants. A high arrest-rate officer before the program started, he believed that several arrests resulted either directly or indirectly from information received from citizens. For him, if not for other officers in the program, personal contacts were clearly "real police work," which helped to catch criminals and prevent crime.

TABLE 2

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF INDIVIDUALS CONTACTED BY POLICE  
AND TOTAL PROGRAM AREA POPULATION

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	<u>Contacted Individuals*</u>	<u>Total Population (1983 Survey)</u>
<u>Percentage of Each Group Which Were:</u>		
Male	51	46
Female	49	54
15-24 years old	26	19
25-49 years old	47	55
50-98 years old	26	26
Black	25	24
White	51	41
Hispanic	22	33
Other	1	2

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\*Including residents and representatives of non-residential establishments.

## Program Elements

In sum, the program area received six program elements:

1. Personal contacts.
2. Increased police presence produced by maintaining beat integrity in order to make the contacts. Police said they previously had spent little time in the area.
3. New patrol tactics (e.g., more frequent patrol, stopping people in public to talk with them, traffic stops for the same purpose) which may have increased public awareness of the police.
4. Direct access to the officers through the phone numbers provided on their business cards.
5. Newsletters mailed to the contacted citizens after the contact.
6. Familiarity with the area by police and with the officers by their citizens.

### CITIZEN CONTACT PATROL IN THE CONTEXT OF PATROL PRACTICE

The contact patrol strategy can be set in an historical, professional context which serves to demonstrate the ways it differs from other patrol practices. Ever since the idea of police patrol was first articulated in Nineteenth Century England, the question of how to patrol most effectively has remained unresolved. The debate over method has often focused on the means of transportation police should use. Horse, bicycle, motorcycle, and foot patrol have all been used and advocated, even since the advent of the radio dispatched patrol car. But the means of transportation may not be nearly as important as what police do while they are on patrol.

The debate over transportation arises from the critique of automobile patrols as having isolated police from the community, cutting off the

opportunity for informal contacts between pedestrian citizens and officers. The 1968 Report of the National Advisory Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Civil Disorder identified such "stranger policing" as a cause of urban riots.

The Kansas City Preventive Patrol Experiment (Kelling, Pate, et al., 1974) focused the growing concern over patrol method. By finding that variations in the numbers of patrol cars in residential neighborhoods made little difference in the crime rate, that experiment suggested to some people that we could safely reduce the size of police departments. Other people drew what may be a more useful conclusion: that police should be doing something else on patrol besides merely driving around while waiting to be dispatched to a call for service.

The 1970s produced many attempts to patrol neighborhoods more effectively. Wilson (1983) divides these attempts into "community service" and "crime attack" strategies. The community service approach encourages officers to become more familiar with their neighborhoods, developing contacts with citizens that can lead to better intelligence about crime and, therefore, to higher arrest rates. The crime attack approach bypasses neighborhood residents in a direct attempt to catch criminals (through decoys or stakeouts) or deter potential criminals (through aggressive field interrogations).

The problem with the community service innovations of the 1970s was a general failure of implementation. "Team policing," the most common name for such efforts, usually attempted radical change in police activity, relations among police and supervisors, and systems of dispatching officers. Few departments could actually produce team policing's key elements of increased personal contact with the community, meetings and supervisory coordination among

all police working a patrol beat, and a ban on calls outside of that beat (Sherman, et al. 1973).

The Houston Citizen Contact Patrol test, in contrast, succeeded in implementing two of these elements: personal contacts and beat integrity. Unlike the team policing efforts, it did not try to create an area police "team," or try to restructure the role of the supervisor, or otherwise threaten the professional autonomy of the officers - - as the earlier team policing experiments had done.

The contribution of this field test to the patrol method problem is that unlike earlier "community service" efforts, it emphasizes patrol method rather than patrol organization or patrol officer numbers. It provides a fairly clear test of the different effects of doing patrol with and without some primarily police-initiated, friendly personal contacts.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND ANALYSIS

### Design

In order to measure the impact of personal contact patrol, the Police Foundation conducted before and after surveys in both the program and comparison areas. These surveys were designed to measure two types of effects.

1. Area Effects. In order to assess the effects of the program on a representative cross section of the population, a random sample of residents was interviewed prior to program implementation, and another sample was

interviewed 10 months after implementation. Among other things, this procedure allowed us to determine how the neighborhood had changed, if at all. The pre-program survey resulted in 932 completed interviews with residents in the two areas, with response rates of 78 percent in the program area and 75 percent in the comparison area. The post-program survey yielded 963 completed interviews with responses rates of 83 percent in the program area and 78 percent in the comparison area.

Individual Effects. In order to assess the effects of the program on individuals, regardless of how the area might have changed, some respondents (constituting a panel) were interviewed in program and comparison areas both before and after program implementation. There were 315 panel respondents in the program area and 183 in the comparison area; these numbers constituted 58 and 46 percent, respectively, of the program and comparison area Wave 1 cross-sectional samples.

#### Outcome Measures

The impact measures included questions about crime victimization, fear, and the police. The measurement of crime was confined to whether the respondent had been the victim of a crime recently, rather than how many crimes they had experienced. The measures of fear and perceptions of crime as a problem combined a number of questions, discussed in the technical report (Wycoff and Skogan, 1985) and its appendix, into various scales of fear and perceptions of crime.

## Analysis

Data from the area-wide samples for both areas, for both waves of the survey, were pooled and merged and subjected to a regression analysis in which controls for survey wave, area of residence, the interaction between survey wave and area of residence, and numerous respondent covariates were applied.

The analysis model for the panel data is similar with the addition of a variable which is the pretest score on the outcome measure. The use of the pretest score provides for additional control of unmeasured differences among respondents.

Additionally for panel respondents, regression analysis was used to explore the possible relationship between program awareness and outcome measures. And, also within the panel, regression analysis was used to probe possible differences in program impact among demographic subgroups.

The non-residential data were analyzed using one-tailed t-tests to determine whether there were significant differences in outcomes within areas over time.

## PROGRAM EFFECTS

### Effects for Residential Respondents

Twelve percent of the cross-sectional and fifteen percent of the panel survey respondents recalled that the police had come to their doors. The effects of the contact, combined with other elements of the program, appear to have been substantial, especially as determined by the pooled cross-sectional,

area analysis. The results for both the cross-sectional and the panel analyses are summarized in Table 3.

The first and third columns report the sign and size of the regression coefficients associated with living in the program area\* after the other variables in the model have been taken into account. The second and fourth columns report the level of statistical significance of the coefficients.

At the area-level, respondents living in the Citizen Contact Program area, relative to those in the comparison area, had significantly (  $p < .05$ ) lower scores on measures of:

Fear of Personal Victimization in the Area,  
Perceived Area Personal Crime Problems,  
Perceived Area Property Crime Problems,  
Perceived Area Social Disorder Problems,  
Perceived Police Aggressiveness, and  
Property Crime Victimization.

Further, the program is positively and significantly associated with the scale, "Satisfaction With the Area."

The contact program appears to have had statistically significant, predicted effects on six of the eight attitude measures of program impact. For the other two attitudes, the effects were in the predicted direction but were not significant.

The program appears to have no impact, at the area-level, on the two behavioral measures--"Defensive Behaviors" and "Household Crime Prevention."

Somewhat surprisingly, since this effect was not predicted for the program, respondents in the program area reported significantly lower levels of property crime victimization.

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\*And, for the cross-sectional analysis, being interviewed after program implementation.

TABLE 3

PROGRAM EFFECTS FOR CROSS-SECTIONAL AND PANEL ANALYSES:  
REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS AND LEVELS OF SIGNIFICANCE

Outcome Scale	Cross-Sectional Analysis		Panel Analysis	
	Regression Coefficient (b)	Level of Significance	Regression Coefficient (b)	Level of Significance
Fear of Personal Victimization in Area	-.12	.02*	-.07	.16
Perceived Area Personal Crime Problems	-.14	.01*	-.08	.30
Worry About Area Property Crime Problems	-.10	.10	-.04	.48
Perceived Area Property Crime Problems	-.21	.01*	-.09	.10
Perceived Area Social Disorder Problems	-.15	.01*	-.13	.01*
Satisfaction with Area	+.13	.02*	+.15	.01*
Evaluations of Police Service	+.09	.13	+.22	.01*
Perceived Police Aggressiveness	-.04	.04*	+.01	.59
Defensive Behaviors to Avoid Victimization	-.03	.32	-.01	.74
Property Crime Victimization	-.15	.01*	-.11	.01*
Personal Crime Victimization	-.06	.08	-.02	.60
	(N)	(1983)		(494)

\* Statistically significant at  $p < .05$ .

In the panel analysis, persons living in the program area had significantly ( $p \leq .05$ ) higher scores on:

Satisfaction with the Area, and  
Evaluations of Police Service, and

significantly lower levels of

Perceived Area Social Disorder, and  
Property Crime Victimization.

All other measures of effect were in the predicted direction but were not statistically significant.

The cross-sectional analysis provides the best estimates of the effects of the program on the area as a whole while the panel analysis gives the best test of program effects on individuals. There are fewer effects (and slightly different effects) found in the panel than in the cross-sectional analysis. We cannot determine whether these differences are due to the fact that the two data sets were subjected to different types of analyses, are due to the differential receptivity to the program on the part of respondents in the two types of samples, or are due to the effects of panel respondents having been interviewed twice in one year rather than only once (the case for the cross-sectional respondents).

#### Effects for Resident Subgroups

Analysis of program impact on the individuals in the panel broken down for demographic subgroups, shows that black respondents and those who rent their home tend not to benefit from this program. Both blacks and renters (95 percent of blacks were renters) were significantly less likely than whites and home owners to report awareness of various program elements. There were no

subgroup-specific components of the program and the differential effect on subgroups is a matter for theorizing and additional research.

#### Effect of Program Awareness on Outcomes

Respondents who reported that an officer came to their door or who reported having seen an officer in the area in the previous 24 hours were more likely than other respondents to indicate desirable program effects. Both groups had higher satisfaction with the area and gave higher evaluations of police service. Only those who recalled seeing an officer in the previous 24 hours had significantly lower levels of fear of personal victimization. And only those who recalled a visit from an officer had significantly lower levels of perception of area personal crime problems and area property crime problems.

#### Findings for Nonresidential Respondents

There were no significant Wave 1-Wave 2 differences for any of the outcome measures in either the program or the comparison area. Thus, the program appears to have had no impact on nonresidential respondents. This may be because these respondents, especially business representatives, were more aware of police being in the areas prior to the contact program than were residential respondents.

#### Alternative Explanations of Findings

We cannot rule out the possibility that other, unknown factors (e.g., arrests) might account for the reduction in victimization and fear in the program area. Further, the fact that Wave 1 outcome scores were higher (or lower) in the program area than the comparison area raises the possibility that the measured effects were, at least in part, the result of regression towards

the mean. This possibility is one basis for the argument to replicate this strategy in a number of areas.

#### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We believe that citizen contact patrol may well have caused the substantial reductions in reported victimization and fear, as well as other reported effects. It is not clear how long the changes will last, but they were major effects to have been produced in such a short time period. These findings, however, are based on a sample of only two areas. They would be much more convincing if they were based on 50 areas, since it would help to rule out pre-existing differences in the areas as a cause of the change. Even with this caution, however, the results are still quite impressive.

We recommend that police departments should adopt citizen contact patrol in similar low-density neighborhoods. Special emphasis should be placed on home visits, since these comprised the bulk of the contacts in the Houston experiment. It should be noted, however, that there were at least six identifiable components of the Houston Citizen Contact Program (see page 9.) This evaluation has assessed the effect of the six components working in concert and cannot estimate the probable effect of any element of the program which might be implemented without benefit of the other five.

We further recommend that any future efforts to implement citizen contact patrol be accompanied by training of the officers (which was not done in Houston, except for one officer's visits to other cities). Supervision and support of the program will also be necessary for successful implementation.

## Replication

These findings warrant a careful replication with similarly detailed measurement, including measures of how many arrests result from these contacts. In the meantime, however, police departments can conduct their own replications with the following basic steps. We recommend this kind of pilot phase-in rather than city-wide overnight adoption of citizen contact patrol.

1. Select 50 patrol beats at random from all beats or all residential beats.
2. Choose 25 at random to receive citizen contact patrol.
3. Train all officers working or substituting on those 25 beats.
4. Have the beats supervised by sergeants who have been trained to manage the program.
5. Require citizen contact cards from household visits to be turned in daily.
6. After one year, compare arrests per officer (counted properly--see Police Foundation Report #2) to see if citizen contact patrol leads to more arrests.
7. Report your findings to the national police community. This can be done by writing an article for Police Chief or some of the academic journals; by sending a copy of your report to the National Criminal Justice Reference Service, or to Law Enforcement News; and by presenting the findings at professional meetings, such as those of the International Association of Chiefs of Police, National Sheriffs' Association, National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Officers, Police Executive Research Forum, City Managers' Association, U. S. Conference of Mayors, American Society of Criminology and the American Criminal Justice Society.

the mean. This possibility is one basis for the argument to replicate this strategy in a number of areas.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend that:

1. Police departments consider implementation of some form of citizen contact patrol; and
2. That the research community continue to focus resources on the evaluation of this strategy.

These recommendations are based on the fact that both the cross-sectional analysis and the panel analysis, although their findings are not entirely congruent, indicate that the strategy can have several beneficial effects on the community into which it is introduced, and on our belief that several important questions remain to be answered about the effects of the strategy and the conditions under which they can be achieved.

In both forms of analysis, the contact strategy was related to reduced perceptions of property crime problems in the area, increased satisfaction with the police and with the neighborhood, and to reductions in property crime victimization. Additionally, the cross-sectional analysis found the strategy related to reductions in fear of victimization and perceptions of personal crime problems in the area. Neither form of analysis found the strategy to be related to undesirable views of the police as overly aggressive or to the tendency of respondents to take more defensive behaviors to avoid victimizations (and, as a consequence, to avoid the streets.)

It is only with widespread and careful replication of this kind of test that the police field will be able to accumulate knowledge about how to patrol more effectively in a wide range of cities. But the Houston experiment alone refutes the way the Kansas City experiment has often been misread to say patrol has no impact. Police patrol probably can make a difference in neighborhood victimization rates - - depending upon how it is done.

#### A POSTSCRIPT

On Thursday, October 25, 1984, Officer Charlie Epperson was in a hardware store in the Program Area. An older gentleman approached and addressed him, "Mr. Epperson...." The man proceeded to describe an abandoned vehicle in the area.

Officer Epperson ticketed the car twice and then arranged to have it towed the following Monday.

The program area resident reporting the problem had been contacted by Officer Epperson during the first month of the Citizen Contact Patrol; he had not been contacted again in the 14 months between the contact at his home and the meeting in the hardware store.

"Mr. Epperson," he said.

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