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By Invitation Only *Managing the Annual Street Party*

By Ronald R. Thrasher, M.S.



Many communities stage annual celebrations. They may rally motorcycles, harvest peaches, kick off a rodeo, or remember a moment in history. These events can bring communities together or set the stage for tragedy. A celebration that the public perceives as an economic boon literally may be a bust. In fact, only the police may understand the true cost of managing large, often-intoxicated crowds.

This article explores the local "street party," contrasting community perceptions and forces that drive such events with actual observations. This information may provide police with ways to manage

street parties and other major events by helping to change public opinion about their costs and benefits to the community.

THE STILLWATER CELEBRATION

In July 1987, a local restaurant started a new tradition in Stillwater. It promoted its anniversary with a weekend party, which became an instant success. In addition to attracting families, the event also drew crowds of college students from nearby Oklahoma State University.

Over the years, the party grew quite popular and soon became a week-long celebration. Local merchants were pleased with the event;

they viewed it as a family-oriented reunion that brought the town increased revenues. But, Stillwater police were about to change that perception.

How Much Revenue Does It Generate?

To estimate the amount of revenue the party generated for the city, an Oklahoma State University professor surveyed visitors to the annual Stillwater celebration by distributing questionnaires at motels, restaurants, and retail stores. The survey showed that the average visitor in town for the day spent \$100; the average overnight visitor, \$130, for each day of what was, at

the time, a 2-day event. Given crowd estimates, the chamber of commerce, the visitor's bureau, and businesses then advertised that the event annually generated \$6.8 million for the local economy.

Stillwater police saw more than dollar signs, however. They saw a predominately college-aged crowd that, according to arrest records, traveled from out of town only to attend the party. Once there, they usually became highly intoxicated. Many of the party-goers arrived just prior to the event and brought their own beer, liquor, and food. Most participants either spent the night with friends, in vacant lots, or in city parks. For the most part, they did not spend money in the community.

An opportunity to patronize the local shops did come when the revelers ran out of beer. Unfortunately, they often cost business owners more money than they spent. One convenience store had to close because the clerks could not control the shoplifting and vandalism. Even in the face of this evidence, many residents still believed that the party provided a major source of revenue for the community.

How Much Does It Cost?

Police calculated the cost of the event in terms of both time and money. In 1987, a crowd of 10,000 gathered in and around the establishment that organized the party. Police worked 130 hours of overtime, received 89 additional related calls for service, and filed 21 criminal charges. By 1993, the party had grown to a week-long event, with a crowd of over 64,000 people taking up two square blocks. This time, police worked over 3,000 hours of overtime, and in the last 3 days of

“ Just as criminal investigators profile rapists, murderers, or burglars, police administrators should profile major events that occur within their jurisdictions. ”



Lieutenant Thrasher commands the Criminal Investigations Unit of the Stillwater, Oklahoma, Police Department.

the party, filed 172 criminal charges. They responded to numerous additional calls for service from parties and disturbances all over the community, which most likely were a result of the street party.

The cost to the police department represented only one area of consideration. Other city agencies provided services during the event, such as supporting officers who worked in 100-degree temperatures, manning remote booking facilities, and providing prisoner transport and night court. City officials also spent time planning and managing the event. Finally, both police and city officials faced potential liability costs in controlling a large, intoxicated crowd.

MANAGING THE EVENT

Changing Public Perceptions

Stillwater police recognized that they could not control the event without changing the public's perception of it. Citizens and promoters who actually attended the celebration often left before party guests got

carried away, sometimes literally. The department took photographs and produced a video that illustrated what the others missed—damage, injury, and criminal behavior. In addition to distributing this evidence to the media, the department addressed business and community groups on one of their favorite topics—money.

The police graphed local sales tax revenues for the months of June, July, and August, from 1986 through 1993. Because merchants collect sales tax on all goods and services, these revenues paint a realistic portrait of money spent in the community.

The graph dramatically demonstrated that collected sales taxes had changed little after 1987, the year the party began. In fact, sales tax revenues in August—when Oklahoma State students returned for classes—were substantially higher than in June or in July, when the annual party took place.

In the face of overwhelming evidence, the community realized that the cost of their annual party gave them little reason to celebrate.

Business owners began to work more closely with police and eventually paid for a portion of the overtime required to control the event.

Gathering Information

Over the years, as the police searched for ways to manage the party, they turned to a variety of resources in addition to local business owners. They contacted the police in neighboring communities for suggestions, studied the advertising used in previous years, and critiqued their own procedures. Finally, they gathered essential information just prior to the actual event.

Several weeks before the party, police interviewed convenience store employees, bartenders, bouncers, and anyone who might have heard people mention attending the party. They also contacted local motel managers to elicit information about guests who had reserved rooms for the celebration.

After learning where the individuals resided, officers contacted these cities. They obtained information concerning crime trends, juvenile crime, and gang activity, in the hopes of anticipating and preventing situations they might encounter in Stillwater.

This method was based on the presumption that a majority of the party attendees actually stayed in motels. The police had not discovered yet that few, if any, of the college-aged crowd made such sleeping arrangements. In the long run, the information gleaned from this approach was of little use.

The most valuable information came from behavioral research that plainclothes police officers conducted in drinking establishments.

As police watched the drinking habits of patrons both inside and outside, it became apparent that people behaved differently when they drank inside than when they drank on the street or sidewalk.

People inside drank less. They talked, danced, ate, and played video games. Many small arguments resolved themselves when one individual walked away. When interviewed, these patrons indicated that

“
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the public perceives
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”

they wanted to take the fight outside because the manager would either throw them out or call the police. Managers said that they were eager to report disturbances to the police to protect their businesses and their liquor licenses.

Outside, the scenario changed considerably. People drinking on the street or sidewalk appeared to have little to do but drink. They seemed to consume more alcohol and become more intoxicated. Fights that occurred on the street quickly turned into brawls.

The street also became the “in” place to hang out for young people under 21, the legal drinking age. Their overheard conversations often concerned some type of criminal activity. Gang recruitment and even drug sales occurred within these

groups. When questioned, participants said the chances of getting caught doing something wrong were much less outside. There, they had a better chance of escaping.

Laying Down the Law

To curb illegal activity, police considered implementing a local law banning public beer consumption.¹ A prior law had proved successful but short-lived. Enacted in 1978, it was repealed in 1982, primarily due to the efforts of university students, who lobbied persistently, then turned up in record numbers to vote. From 1978 to 1982, Part I offenses² dropped 18 percent from the 4 years before the ordinance took effect. Four years following the law’s repeal, Part I offenses increased 29 percent.

Two other college towns with similar laws had experienced an 8.13-percent decrease and a 15.79-percent decrease in Part I offenses after prohibiting public beer consumption. Of five other Oklahoma cities with public consumption laws, four experienced decreases of 12 percent, 10 percent, 6 percent, and 21 percent. Only one experienced a 5-percent increase, similar to the statewide crime trend at the time.

Using this information, police helped support a ban on public beer consumption. Voters enacted a local ordinance a few months prior to the 1994 street party.

Businesses also responded by advertising a month-long event rather than highlighting the street party. Publicity for the event emphasized a family-oriented reunion and did not mention drinking. Posted signs announced the ban on public consumption.

Seeing Results

Although the celebration took place as planned, the street party did not. Business establishments confined the festivities to their own properties; crowds did not spill onto the streets. Attendance fell to fewer than 1,000 people the weekend of the traditional street party, with families representing the majority of the guests. On Saturday night—typically the evening of heaviest activity—police made no related arrests. They also reported almost total voluntary compliance with the public consumption law.

Finally, from a business perspective, sales tax revenues for that month *increased* almost \$60,000 from the previous year. These profits reflected the increased number of families and other individuals who

spent more time and money inside local businesses and at other tourist attractions, instead of crowds of youths who did little more than party in the street.

CONCLUSION

Just as criminal investigators profile rapists, murderers, or burglars, police administrators should profile major events that occur within their jurisdictions. Factors to consider include the type of event; who or what drives the event; who attends the event and why; what costs and profits are realized and who incurs them; and what is required to change the nature of the event. Then, the police should bring their concerns to the community and work to enact a solution, which may involve changing public opinion.

Annual celebrations often put police between the threat of tragedy and the perception of large local revenues. By profiling these events, police may discover that the foundations are fragile and easy to dismantle. The time to control the party is not while the beer bottles are flying and the trash dumpsters are burning, but well before the invitations go out. ♦

Endnotes

¹State and local law has prohibited the public consumption of liquor since 1986. By State law, liquor and beer are defined and regulated separately.

²The FBI Uniform Crime Report defines Part I offenses as criminal homicide, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft, and arson. Arson was not included in this study.

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