

AN EVALUATION OF SPECIALIZED POLICE PATROLS

by

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Scope of the Study

What is known about specialized patrols in the United States? What types of specialized patrols are relied upon by most law enforcement agencies? Which type of specialized patrol is most effective in combatting a particular type of crime?

These are some of the questions which we at the Institute for Human Resources Research attempted to answer for the National Institute of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice, Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, during 1975 for the Institute's Phase I Evaluation of Selected Patrol Strategies.

Like other institutions working on the Phase I evaluation, we were assigned specific tasks. These began with a review of relevant literature and a mail, telephone, and field survey of specialized patrols across the nation. Using these data, our team of persons skilled in law enforcement and evaluation research used statistical techniques to determine the extent to which our nation's law enforcement agencies rely on particular kinds of specialized patrols. We then selected 21 geographically dispersed patrols for indepth study in order to complete our assigned tasks of classifying projects by types or "families," designing a model which would permit us to both systematically analyze the existing data on different families and identify variables that have been and should be measured in evaluating

specialized patrols, and to assess the existing state of knowledge on specialized patrol in terms of data reliability, gaps in information, and the success and failure of each patrol family.

Finally, our team was to document future directions for evaluating specialized patrols.

The end result was five rather long and complex reports^{1,2,3,4,5} which represented both a judgmental and an empirical assessment of the information on specialized patrols. In such a brief time, I can present only the highlights of these reports; however, a rather detailed summary of the research has been published and can be obtained from the National Institute of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice.⁶

Findings

Our findings supported the commonly held assumption that law enforcement agencies have relied increasingly on specialized patrols over the years. In fact, our survey found that three fourths of the department serving communities of 50,000 or more persons rely upon one or more types of specialized patrol operations. Smaller cities, sheriffs, state police, and county police also rely on specialized tactics, though to a much lesser degree than larger cities.

Three forms of specialized patrol tactics are most frequently used and were the subject of our study. These are: civilian clothes, uniformed tactical, and mechanical devices. Civilian clothes units decrease the visibility of the police and enhance

their ability to combat certain forms of crime. They appear to be the most frequently used form of specialized patrol. Almost as frequently used are uniformed tactical units. These concentrate on complementing the work of traditional patrol; they are designed to cope with critical situations and to permit a saturation of police power at a given time or place. Mechanical devices, such as alarm systems and night vision scopes, bring sophisticated technology to bear on the problem of crime. They seem to be relied on less frequently than civilian dress or uniformed tactical units.

From a review of the literature, it was clear that specialized operations were believed to effect increases in arrests and decreases in crimes while also being cost-effective. However, there were few research findings to substantiate these claims of effectiveness. The effectiveness of specialization appears to depend upon the circumstances need in a local jurisdiction.

The literature suggests that where specialization is needed, it offers at least five advantages. One is that it leads to a clear designation of duties, responsibilities, and objectives so that unit commanders can be held accountable for the unit's level of efficiency. Second, specialization seems to bring about improvements in training. Third, specialization, under proper conditions, can generate group cohesiveness and, thus, job satisfaction and good morale. Fourth, because of their definite responsibility and pride in their unit, specialized personnel may develop a proprietary interest and

participate more fully in departmental operations that relate to their field. Finally, specialized patrols may arouse positive public interest which can aid in securing necessary support for the department and in enhancing police-community relations.

However, specialization may be implemented unnecessarily or in excess so that it becomes detrimental to the department. It then creates problems of coordination between the specialists and nonspecialists in the department, adversely affects morale and job satisfaction, complicates tasks of command, hampers executive development, and arouses negative public relations. It may also lead to "empire building" and to unsuccessful imitation by small departments. Such disadvantages, as well as advantages, need to be considered carefully when planning specialized patrol operations.

Another factor that needs to be considered in implementing a specialized patrol is its potential impact on the community.

Several practices may adversely affect community relations. One stems from deploying officers to high crime areas on the basis of crime statistics for short periods of time. Where this occurs, patrolmen may not become well acquainted with residents and may acquire a detached attitude about the community. Locating the units far away from areas of frequent patrol may add to feelings of citizen distrust as does insensitivity to race relations. Legal and ethical issues have arisen regarding such practices as the use of decoy units which may be misinterpreted as an enticing people to commit crimes. Just how

some specialized patrol tactics are received in the community is often unpredictable but seems to rest on how the police are perceived by the community. Police review boards appear to be one useful means of handling complaints and establishing better police-community relations.¹

In our contacts with about 400 law enforcement agencies across the nation, and in our review of various reports, we found police administrators implicitly assume that specialized patrol personnel will be more effective than traditional patrol in certain crime situations.

Other assumptions were explicitly stated: specialized patrols were expected to deter crime; increase arrests, clearances, and convictions; maintain public safety and respect; and enhance public support of and participation in patrol activities. These assumptions, in fact, were often formulated as patrol objectives.

These common assumptions/objectives sometimes varied in a systematic way which reflected a different rank order of importance given to apprehension and deterrence. That is, in some of the 21 projects studied indepth, the major emphasis was on apprehension; in others it was on deterrence. The two emphases seemingly were related not only to the choice of a tactic but also to certain assumptions regarding the effectiveness of a given level of police visibility. In one instance, invisible police presence seemed to be the preferred strategy. In this case, the major objective was to increase arrests of target criminals; the secondary objective was crime deterrence. In other cases,

departments seemed to assume that increased uniformed police presence was the most effective strategy. In these cases the major objective was deterrence. Increases in arrests emerged as the secondary objective. In still other cases, departments seemed to assume that a multifaceted approach, using both visible and less visible tactics, was most effective. No real difference appeared in the emphasis placed on crime deterrence and apprehension in these multitactic units. These apparent differences led us to identify three families of specialized patrol:

- . Low Visibility patrols--Patrols implemented largely on the assumption that less visible police presence, achieved through civilian dress and/or mechanical device tactics, will lead to increases in apprehension and, therefore, to reductions in target crime
- . High Visibility patrols--Patrols implemented largely on the assumption that increasing visible police presence through a uniformed tactical patrol tactic will deter crime most effectively and also increase the likelihood of arrest
- . Combined High/Low Visibility patrols--Patrols implemented largely on the assumption that a multifaceted approach relying on both visible and less visible police presence achieved through uniformed tactical and civilian dress and/or mechanical device tactics, will effectively reduce crime and increase arrests

To understand more about these patrol families, a general systems model was used to systematically analyze the projects on the same set of variables.

The set of initiating and support system variables included: the assumptions upon which projects were based, their objectives, funding levels and sources, recruitment and selections criteria,

training, planning processes, monitoring and evaluation of specialized patrol activities.

A set of variables related to project intervention processes covered span of control, deployment practices, tactics, choice of methods (e.g., stakeout, surveillance), and various process measures, such as performance, efficiency, cost-effectiveness, job satisfaction and morale.

Of special interest was a set of outcome variables; that is, effectiveness in crime reduction, apprehension, clearances, convictions, and the projects' impact on the communities they serve and the broader society.

Using this model, a three-point scale was devised to rate the reliability of our major informational sources: evaluations, crime figures, and expert (police) opinion.

Two three-point scales were used to rate the projects as a success or failure on selected performance and effectiveness indicators. The reliability ratings assisted in determining the particular success or failure rating given each performance/effectiveness indicator. For example, three projects might show an equally high conviction rate. One might receive the highest rating (Success) because the information source was rated high in reliability. Another might receive the second highest rating (Probable Success) because the information source was only rated of medium reliability. The third might be rated as the least successful (Qualified Success) because the information source received only a low reliability rating.

Failure ratings followed the same pattern. An Unknown rating applied whenever data were uninterpretable or lacking on a given indicator. The Unknown ratings helped to identify gaps in information.

The Success/Failure ratings were applied to several performance/effectiveness indicators such as efficiency, cost-effectiveness, arrests, clearances, convictions, crime reduction, and amount of change effected by the projects on selected measures (e.g., arrests, crime reduction).

Our findings suggested that the data base, in general, was of questionable reliability. Both crime figures and expert opinion tended to fall in the low reliability category.

Data reliability ratings of the 18 evaluation studies varied, but even a high reliability rating was relative and simply denoted a fairly adequate study compared to the other evaluations being considered. These evaluations were quick assessments; none was based on a sophisticated quasi-experimental design. While they, no doubt, were valuable to local departments, they defied solid comparative analysis because they represented many different types of measures on the same phenomenon. Further, the evaluations failed to test the assumptions underlying the existence of specialized patrols.

In summary, the quality of the data base permitted little more than the formulation of a tentative set of conclusions about the performance and effectiveness of specialized patrol projects and families.

From our rather gross ratings on this questionable data base, each of the project families did appear rather successful in meeting its primary objectives of crime deterrence and apprehension. The ratings showed that the High Visibility patrols were more successful at deterrence (their major mission) than at apprehension. The reverse trend appeared for the combined High/Low Visibility patrols; that is, they were slightly more successful at apprehension than deterrence. The Low Visibility patrols were the most difficult to assess since there were only three evaluations on this group of eight patrols. However, existing data showed that this group was slightly more successful at deterrence than apprehension (their major mission). The data on other performance and effectiveness indicators were scant, but the trends tended to be positive. That is, there were more successes than failures on such measures as clearances, convictions, morale, etc.

The data further suggested that a combined use of uniformed tactical and civilian dress tactics may be the most successful approach, perhaps because it provides departments a greater degree of flexibility in solving difficult and complex problems. However, the data suggested that mechanical devices, in general, were often misused, or simply were not used at all; in such cases, of course, they were costly and ineffective.

Other successful approaches used by the projects included:

- . Selection of the best men from various departmental units to serve on specialized patrol

- . Coordinated planning between district and precinct personnel where patrols were deployed to the precinct level
- . Integration of patrol and investigative functions
- . Peer review of performance and reassignment of specialized personnel to nonspecialized units when performance was low
- . Short-term task force missions designed to combat specific crimes
- . Specialized training relevant to assigned problem areas, including training in tactics, methods, legal issues, and use of equipment

The major reasons for failure were:

- . The misuse of mechanical devices
- . The use of volunteer overtime personnel to man specialized patrols
- . Extensive use of stakeouts based on general crime analysis information

Future Directions

While our study cast a favorable light on the use of specialized patrols, it clearly demonstrated significant gaps in the knowledge on specialized patrols. Available knowledge does not provide conclusive answers to crucial management questions facing police administrators, such as:

- . Is specialized patrol more cost-effective than traditional patrol?
- . Which tactic is most cost-effective in a given crime situation?

Nor is there a systematic evaluation system for collecting such crucial data at the local level so that it can be amassed at the national level to permit the Law Enforcement Assistance

Administration to build a sound knowledge base for dissemination and use by regional, state, and local law enforcement personnel.

Future directions, we believe, should involve devising standard measures that can be used to promote two basic types of studies:⁵

- . Studies that will test the implicit assumption that specialized patrols will be more cost-effective than traditional patrol in combatting certain types of crime
- . Studies that will test the assumptions, tactics, and methods underlying the existence of project families and permit comparisons of the effectiveness (including cost-effectiveness) of different visibility levels, tactics, and methods by type of crime

Faced with increases in crime and shrinking budgets, answers to these basic questions become ever more important to police administrators and local officials. Until these questions are answered, departments will not be provided the basic information required to help them in project planning, monitoring, and management.

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