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Research for Practice**Problem-Oriented Policing in Practice**

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Problem-oriented policing was first introduced in an article by Herman Goldstein in 1979. It was formally field-tested in the 1980s in Baltimore County (Cordner, 1986) and Newport News (Eck and Spelman, 1987), given a wider audience through an *Atlantic Monthly* magazine article in 1989 (Wilson and Kelling), and systematically described and explained in Goldstein's 1990 book. Today, it is widely regarded as the most analytical and intellectually challenging strategy in the police arsenal.

Questions linger, however, about the implementation and practicality of problem-oriented policing (POP). The SARA process (scanning, analysis, response, assessment) for carrying out POP is analytically and creatively demanding, as well as time-consuming. Some observers question whether police have the knowledge and skill to implement the SARA process properly. Police officers often question whether they have the time to do so.

The research reported here carefully examined problem-oriented policing in practice by ordinary police officers in one agency – the San Diego, California Police Department. The objective was to discover and describe the reality of everyday, street-level POP as practiced by generalist patrol officers. San Diego was chosen because of its

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1

reputation as a national leader in problem-oriented policing.

Problem-Oriented Policing

Simply put, problem-oriented policing posits that police should focus more attention on *problems*, as opposed to *incidents* (Goldstein, 1990). Problems may be recognizable as collections of incidents related in some way (if they occur at the same location, for example) or as underlying conditions that give rise to incidents, crimes, disorder, and other substantive community issues that people expect the police to handle. By focusing more on problems than on incidents, police can address causes rather than mere symptoms, and consequently have a greater impact.

POP is distinguished from three other modern police strategies in Table 1. Reactive (9-1-1) policing was well represented by the *Adam 12* and *Dragnet* television shows – the police waited for crime to occur, and then handled it. Proactive policing is more aggressive and intrusive than reactive policing, and has been symbolized in recent years by the reengineered New York Police Department. Community policing has a softer image and more preventive orientation than proactive policing, relying more on engaging the public as partners in reducing crime than on aggressive law enforcement. Compared to these other strategies, problem-oriented policing offers the most targeted and in-depth approach, and epitomizes the “work smarter, not harder” admonition.

Two recent assessments of the state of problem-oriented policing reached somewhat different conclusions. Ron Clarke (1998) reviewed several hundred case studies that were submitted for consideration for the Herman Goldstein Award for

Excellence in Problem-Oriented Policing during the middle 1990s, and concluded that they generally lacked rigor. In particular, he concluded that problems were poorly specified, analysis and assessment were very weak, and responses tended toward conventional enforcement tactics. Michael Scott (2000) reviewed 100 of the same POP projects, but concentrated on those that had survived initial screening by judges. He agreed that analysis and assessment were rather cursory, but saw signs of improvement over time. Also, he emphasized the wide range of problem types that were addressed and the wide range of responses that were adopted. He too noted the frequent use of conventional police tactics, but argued that they were often used as supplements to other, more innovative POP responses rather than as the sole or primary responses to problems.

Research Site

San Diego, California is the 7th largest city in the United States, with a 2000 census population of 1,223,400. Because of its proximity to the Mexican border, this census count is believed to significantly under-represent the actual resident population. The 2000 census population was 25% Hispanic, 14% Asian, and 8% African-American. The police department currently has 2,094 sworn positions and 671 civilian positions.

The San Diego Police Department has had a strong commitment to problem-oriented policing for more than ten years. POP training of one kind or another has been offered since the late 1980s. Problem solving was formally incorporated into field training in 1996, as one of the anchors on recruits' daily performance evaluation forms. The department was one of the first in the country, in 1998, to integrate problem solving

throughout its recruit training academy. In the department's tri-annual performance review program for sworn officers, problem solving is one of 14 specific criteria that are scored. The department has its own database, POP-Track, for storing and retrieving information on POP projects.

Research Methods

This study employed two principal methods, interviews and a survey. Interviews were conducted with 320 patrol officers assigned to regular patrol duties in the department's eight patrol divisions. In the larger divisions, interviewees were randomly selected; in smaller divisions, interviews were sought with every eligible officer. The interviews consisted of 19 questions about POP activity and POP attitudes, including descriptions of officers' best problem-solving efforts in the last year, plus eight demographic questions. Notes made during the interviews were then coded and analyzed.

A survey was administered within patrol divisions after the completion of all of the interviews. A total of 267 completed and useable surveys were obtained from a process of distributing and collecting surveys at patrol roll-call line-ups on all shifts in all divisions over a two-week period. The five-page survey contained six multiple-item questions that asked about attitudes and beliefs toward the practice and effectiveness of various facets of POP in the police department, as well as eight demographic questions.

Findings

Interviewed officers were asked to describe their best problem solving effort

during the last year in a POP project that had at least reached the response stage. They were asked to identify an effort in which they served as the lead officer, if possible, but if necessary, one in which they played a supporting role. Most of the officers (71%) were able to identify and describe such a problem solving effort, but 93 interviewees (29%) were not able to do so. Interviews of these 93 officers skipped ahead to the general questions about POP in the department, since the officers were not able to describe a recent problem solving effort.

Scope of the Problem. Officers tend to tackle small-scale problems. Over 50% of the officers who were interviewed described POP projects that were small in scope – typically focused on one person, one address, one building, one parking lot, or one intersection (see Figure 1). Another 29% described POP projects of moderate scope – several addresses, a block, a park, or a neighborhood. Only 14% described large-scale POP projects (covering a beat, a service area, a division, the city, or the state).

Nature of the Problem. Most problem solving is focused on drug and disorder problems. About three-fourths of the POP projects described in interviews dealt with drugs, public order issues, or transients and special populations (see Figure 2). Less than 10% targeted personal or property crimes. On the surveys, officers thought that POP was most effective for dealing with drug houses, deteriorating neighborhoods, and repeat call locations. Officers thought POP was least effective in dealing with domestic abuse, other violent crimes, and traffic accidents.

Scanning. Most POP projects arise out of specific observations or complaints, rather than from analysis of data or any other elaborate scanning methodology. When

asked how specific problems came to their attention, interviewees most often cited radio calls, personal observations, and direct citizen complaints. Few POP projects were assigned by supervisors or initiated based on crime analysis information.

Analysis. Like scanning, analysis tends to be informal and limited. Three analysis-related questions were posed during the interviews. The first asked officers to identify the information sources that they used in analyzing the problem (see Figure 3). A wide range of sources were identified (16 in all), the most common of which was personal observation (58%). Speaking to affected parties, especially residents, businesses, other officers, and other agencies was common, as was gathering information about specific suspects and related parties (field interviews, record checks, and identifying property owners). These sources of information seem to correspond to the rather small-scale, reactive, incident-oriented variety of problem solving that appears to have been most common. Officers also said that they often made use of call for service and crime data for areas and/or specific addresses.

A second analysis-oriented question asked officers to indicate how long the analysis phase of the POP process took. Only six officers were able and willing to directly answer this question: three said less than one week and three said more than one week. Some of the interviewees had only played supporting roles in the POP projects they were describing, and may not have been intimately involved in the analysis stage of their project. Others, though, seemed amused by the question. The clear impression given was that the officers rarely engaged in a discrete analysis stage during their projects. Rather, they gathered some information about the problem as they went along, integrating this

information gathering with the next stage of the process, responding to the problem.

Except to the degree that they might learn something interesting about specific individuals connected to the problem (such as criminal records or hidden ownership), they did not really expect analysis to help them design effective responses to the problem.

The third analysis-related question asked the officers what they had learned as a result of analyzing the problem. It should be noted that for this question, unlike most used in the interview, some response categories were pre-determined, and respondents were prompted if they could not readily identify any results of the analysis. Interviewees indicated most often that they had learned something about offenders, followed by locations, harms attributable to the problem, and causes of the problem. They were least likely to indicate that they had learned something about victims, guardians, or how long the problem had persisted.

An item on the police officer survey asked how important each of six different factors were "for officers doing only limited analysis" as part of their POP efforts. By far, the item rated as most important was "officers are too busy to do a thorough analysis" – over 80% indicated that this factor had some importance or was very important. The proportion rating the time issue specifically as "very important" was 43%; no other factor was rated very important by more than 10% of respondents.

The next highest rated factor on the survey for limiting POP analysis was "many problems are easy to understand, so analysis is not that important" (61% of officers rated this reason as having some importance or as very important). This probably coincides with the preponderance of small-scale problems that officers had chosen to address in

their POP projects, especially those related to drug houses and other drug problems. It parallels Clarke's (1998) observation that when POP projects are very narrow and small in scale, such as those focused on one person or one address, both analysis and assessment are often viewed as luxuries rather than necessities.

Response. Several interview questions focused on the response stage of the officer's recent POP experience. One asked officers to identify the methods they had used to come up with their responses. By far, the most common method was "personal experience" (62%), followed by brainstorming (26%). The only other method used more than 10% of the time was "informal discussions with other officers." Clearly, within the context of ordinary problem-solving activity, in most cases the process of searching for or creating responses is no more rigorous than the processes of scanning and analysis. Officers primarily rely on their own ideas, based on their own experience, or else informal discussions with other officers. Although brainstorming was used about one-quarter of the time, this too seemed to represent a rather informal process. Officers rarely conducted research, reviewed past POP cases, consulted resource lists, attended formal Problem Solving meetings, or utilized squad meetings as vehicles for generating response alternatives.

Another question asked officers to identify the resources that they drew upon in responding to the problem. The most common resources were from within the police department (especially other patrol officers or other division teams/specialists), but it was not uncommon for officers to draw on the private sector (26%), other city agencies (18%), and code compliance as well (17%). Overall, 54% of the resources utilized were

police or other criminal justice, while 46% were from other governmental and non-governmental sources. It is probably fair to say that many patrol officers have learned the wisdom of incorporating other police and non-police resources in their POP responses, both because these resources help address the problem and because they lighten the burden on the officers themselves.

Officers were also asked to describe the actual responses that were employed in their POP project (see Figure 4). The most commonly used response, by far, was targeted enforcement by uniformed patrol officers (46%). Five other responses were fairly common -- two traditional responses, directed or saturation patrol (21%) and targeted investigations (18%), and three more contemporary or community-based responses, altering the physical environment (27%), collaborating with other agencies (24%), and conveying information (23%). These findings about POP responses track fairly closely with Scott (2000), who found that using the criminal justice system, altering the physical environment, working with other agencies, and conveying information were the most common responses identified in noteworthy Goldstein award nominations. However, in his review of noteworthy POP award nominees Scott found an average of five responses per POP project, whereas in this San Diego data the average was only 2.3 responses per project.

An item on the survey asked officers to indicate the importance of six different factors for "officers not being very creative in designing customized responses to problems." The overall most important reason was "officers tend to rely on their own favorite responses and use them over and over again." This explanation for the lack of

creativity in developing POP responses has not been given much attention in the national discussion about POP-as-practiced, but it seems to fit human nature (creatures of habit) as well as volumes of research over many decades in the general fields of problem solving, decision making, and planning. It is probably a shortcoming in the practice of problem-oriented policing that deserves greater attention in future research, as well as greater efforts to enhance this particular aspect of the POP process.

The reason that the most officers rated as "very important," and the second highest rated overall, was "officers are too busy" (28%). The third highest item overall, and another one that mirrors responses to the earlier item about limited POP analysis, was "many problems are pretty routine and the best responses are obvious." The lowest rated reason, again similar to the limited analysis question, was "most problems are too pressing to allow much delay while officers design creative responses," although even on this item officers were split about 50-50 on whether it had low importance or high importance.

The item among these reasons for limited creativity in POP responses that had the greatest standard deviation was "officers are too busy to spend much time designing creative responses." The explanation for this variability among responses seems to be that most officers feel strongly that they and their colleagues cannot do full-fledged POP because they are simply too busy doing other things (handling calls, particularly), while a sizeable number of officers feel pretty strongly that this excuse is not valid. This argument about how busy patrol officers really are, and whether they are too busy to engage in such activities as POP and community policing, goes on in many police

departments, including San Diego.

Assessment. Two interview items directly pertained to the assessment stage of the POP process. One asked officers to identify how they measured the results of their POP effort. The most common assessment method by far was "personal observation" (51% of projects). This was followed rather distantly by analysis of radio calls (14%) and speaking to residents and businesses (13%). Many interviewees could not identify any assessment measures that were used on their projects. On average, one assessment measure was used per POP project, compared to 2.8 information sources per project used in the analysis stage, which itself seemed rather superficial.

The heavy reliance on personal observation supports the common finding that POP assessments tend to be cursory. It also reflects the small scale of most POP projects – as Clarke (1998: 319) noted, for small scale problem solving efforts formal assessment may be redundant because "it is obvious that matters have improved." In support of this connection between scope of the project and rigor of assessment, it was found in the San Diego data that four of the more informal assessment measures were most associated with small scale projects – personal observation and speaking with residents/businesses, other officers, and other agencies. The two assessment measures most associated with more medium and large scale POP projects were data on calls and crimes in the area, and analysis of radio calls.

The second assessment question asked officers to characterize the results of their POP effort. Officers claimed very positive results for POP projects that had been completed (53 projects had not reached the assessment stage, and results were unknown

for 3 other projects). Over half indicated that the problem had been eliminated, and 83% indicated that the problem had at least been significantly reduced. Only 3% of interviewees indicated that they had accomplished no impact on the problem that had been targeted. These findings coincide closely with those from an internal police department study that found that 75% of officers agreed that their recent problem solving efforts were successful (San Diego Police Department, 1998).

Organizational Factors. Several questions asked interviewees about the role that organizational support for POP played in their particular POP effort. One asked about the degree to which crime analysis was involved in the POP project. There was relatively little crime analysis involvement in officers' POP efforts. In a little over a third of the POP projects, crime analysis contributed information at the analysis stage of the process. Little other crime analysis involvement was reported. In particular, in only one case did an officer indicate that crime analysis had led to a problem's initial identification.

Another question asked officers about the role that their sergeants played in their POP effort. Sergeants played generally positive roles. In over three-quarters of the POP projects, the officer's sergeant provided time to work on the project and/or was supportive. In about 40% of cases the sergeant provided advice/ideas, and in about 20% the sergeant was directly involved in the POP effort. Sergeants reportedly discouraged, undermined, or interfered with the POP effort in only two out of 227 cases, less than 1%. These findings are consistent with internal studies done within the police department in 1998 which found that 79% of officers agreed that "my sergeant regularly asks me about my problem solving efforts" (Mills, 1999), that 40% of officers believed that most or all

sergeants were involved in problem solving, and that 87% of officers agreed that their sergeants supported their POP efforts (San Diego Police Department, 1998).

Interviewees were asked what types of POP training they had received. The most common response (74%) was advanced officer training (now called regional officer training). Other types of POP training that were identified were special training/menu classes (27%), recruit academy training (27%), line-up/roll call training (17%), attendance at the annual POP conference (10%), and original POP training in the 1980s (4%). Only seven officers (2%) stated that they had never received any POP training.

Attitudes and Beliefs. Several interview questions probed officers' attitudes and beliefs toward POP. (These questions were posed to all interviewees, including the 93 who did not have a recent POP project to describe.) The first simply asked "in your view, how important is problem solving as a part of your job as a patrol officer?" Most officers rated POP as at least somewhat important. POP was deemed essential/very important by 46% of interviewees and somewhat important/part of the job by 45%. Only 2.3% rated POP as not important or a waste of time.

A follow-up question asked officers what accounted for their particular view of the importance of POP. Interviewees volunteered 20 different answers. The most frequent responses were "POP is a good way to solve problems" (53% of interviewees) and "this is what police have always done" (32%). The third most common reason was "POP is a good way to be responsive to the community" (23%). The two most common reasons for negative beliefs about the importance of POP were "don't have time" (5%) and "it is just more work" (3%).

Another interview question asked officers "what, if anything, should the police department do to provide more support for problem solving?" Interviewees offered 32 different ideas (see Figure 5). Three of the four most common responses are logically related – more officers (23%), more time (19%), and streamlining of POP documentation (22%). Other top suggestions were more mentoring (13%) and more information on resources that are available (11%). One of the most common responses was "there is enough support for POP now" (19%), and 9% of officers thought that there should be less emphasis on POP, not more.

A related item on the survey asked officers to rate the effectiveness of 13 measures in terms of "how effective you think they would be in improving the overall quality of POP in the San Diego Police Department." Many of these suggested measures were based on themes that arose in the interview stage of the study. Survey responses generally agreed with the interview results on this issue -- the top suggestion was "making more time available to officers to do POP" – over 80% of officers thought this would be a somewhat or very effective measure. The next highest rated measures were streamlining POP paperwork and providing more information about other agencies that could help in problem solving efforts.

Four ideas that were given modest support by the survey respondents represent POP supporting measures that are often recommended – more support and encouragement from supervisors, more group meetings for brainstorming, more direct POP mentoring in the field, and more support for POP from crime analysis. Between 56% and 66% of officers thought these would be somewhat or very effective. Training

remedies, however, got less support – only about 43% of respondents believed that more in-service, FTO, and recruit training would be somewhat or very effective in improving overall POP performance. Support was especially low for two additional related suggestions – 36% and 30%, respectively, thought that more emphasis on POP in promotions and performance evaluations would be somewhat or very effective.

The most controversial proposal, judging by standard deviations, was “letting some officers specialize in POP and dropping the expectation that all officers will do it” (in fact, this item had the largest standard deviation of all the importance and effectiveness items on the survey). This measure had the third highest proportion of responses at the high end of the scale (very effective) and also the third highest at the low end (not effective). Apparently, many officers feel strongly about this idea, pro and con. Overall, though, 58% thought it would be somewhat or very effective, giving it the fifth highest mean value among the 13 items.

Another survey item asked officers to rate 10 POP-related conditions in the department from very low to high. The highest rated conditions are officers' own POP knowledge and skill, followed fairly closely by the quality of their own POP performance, their current supervisor's emphasis on POP, and their peers' skill level for doing POP. The proportion of officers rating these five items as medium or high ranged from 76% to 86%. Officers generally rated their own POP knowledge, skill, and performance higher than that of their peers, but only by a small margin. The two lowest rated items were their own enthusiasm and their peers' enthusiasm for doing POP – 64% rated their peers' enthusiasm for POP as very low or low.

The issue of the respondents' own enthusiasm for doing POP deserves closer mention, as it had the largest standard deviation in this set of items. The split in responses between the low side and the high side was almost exactly 50-50. However, more officers on the low side put themselves at the extreme end (very low enthusiasm) than did officers on the high side, so overall the item had a mean below the midpoint of the scale. The split, though, illustrates the current divergence of feelings in the department toward POP. Many San Diego officers are still very enthusiastic about POP, but many others have soured on it.

Officer Demographics. Interview and survey data were analyzed to look for differences by officer demographics. Officer characteristics did not seem to account for much variation in either POP behavior or POP attitudes. Officers who had received more types of POP training tended to have undertaken larger scale POP projects, and Asian officers tended to report higher quality POP activity. On the survey, sergeants and younger/less experienced officers generally expressed more enthusiasm for POP than other officers.

Discussion

In terms of their actual practice, officers in San Diego tend to have used POP to respond to drug, public order, and transient types of problems more than to traffic, property crime, or personal crime problems. The scope of their problem solving efforts tended to be rather small – typically one person, one address, one building, one parking lot, or one intersection. As this picture indicates, most everyday POP in San Diego fits a

rather narrow approach to "soft" problems, rather than the more wide-ranging approach to all kinds of substantive community problems, including serious crime, envisioned by the ideal POP model.

The process followed by officers in their actual POP projects was not as thorough or rigorous as the ideal model recommends. Problems were most often identified through a radio call or personal observation, the modal analysis method was personal observation, the most common source of response alternatives was personal experience, and the typical assessment method was personal observation. Officers did seem to take advantage of a wide array of resources in responding to the problems that were targeted, though – half were non-police resources, and more than half came from outside the San Diego Police Department. When it came to actual responses, about 44% were traditional police department efforts (including the modal response, uniformed targeted enforcement), while another one-third were non-traditional initiatives that often involved police working together with others (such as conveying information, collaborating with other agencies, and mobilizing the community).

In terms of organizational support for POP, (1) sergeants were generally described as helpful and as stressing POP, although more support and encouragement from sergeants was also suggested, (2) participation in POP training was generally associated with better POP performance, but officers did not recommend additional POP training, and (3) while officers did not seem to make much use of crime analysis in their POP efforts, they recommended more crime analysis support for POP. Other means that were suggested for enhancing POP performance included streamlining POP paper work, more

direct mentoring, and making more information available about other resources that could help with problem solving. The most strongly recommended measure, though, was making more time available for POP. The least popular suggestions were putting more emphasis on POP in promotions and performance evaluations.

Given the department's emphasis on POP for almost 15 years, and especially since POP demands so much hard thinking and analysis from officers, it might be inevitable that some fatigue would set in and that those officers who are not inclined to take a more analytical and creative approach to policing would voice their dissatisfaction. Perhaps the more surprising finding is that attitudes are as positive as they are. In the interviews, 46% of officers said that POP was an essential or very important part of policing, and another 45% deemed it at least somewhat important. The finding that 70% of interviewees in San Diego could describe a recent instance in which they had applied at least some of the principles of POP, including some analysis and the utilization of multiple resources and responses, arguably represents a significant change in police work from 20 years ago. Officers have apparently learned to use problem solving techniques to handle a range of situations, even if they do not routinely implement full-fledged POP.

Conclusion

In San Diego, the POP glass is half-full. Ordinary patrol officers engage in everyday activity that is recognizable as problem solving, but rarely make rigid and formal use of the SARA model.

Officers in San Diego had a tendency to use problem solving primarily in

response to drug and disorder problems. They should use problem solving and problem-oriented policing to address the entire range of community problems they face, including personal crime, property crime, and traffic violations. There are numerous examples from around the country (and the world) of successful and effective POP projects focused on crime (Sampson and Scott, 2000).

Supporting, facilitating, and encouraging innovative problem solving by police officers remains a challenge for police agencies. San Diego has made a concerted effort for over a decade using training, supervision, organizational incentives, a POP project database, and state-of-the-art crime analysis. It is hard to imagine any police department demonstrating more commitment to POP. Officers today express support for POP, but also some skepticism and fatigue.

It may be time to make a distinction between everyday problem solving and problem-oriented policing, in San Diego and elsewhere. When they do problem solving, officers take a thoughtful approach, try to gather some information before proceeding, and often implement a multi-pronged response to problems. This is better than not thinking, not gathering information, and relying on only one response. Modest though it is, problem solving is probably more effective than reactive policing. It should also be more effective than proactive policing, since the tendency in problem solving is to employ targeted enforcement plus one or two additional responses.

Since problem solving has been incorporated within community policing over the last decade it has become even more common and accepted. Officers are urged to reach out to the community and to engage citizens in problem solving. This combination of

problem solving and community engagement has been embraced by many police departments with apparent success in improving police-community relations and reducing community problems.

True problem-oriented policing takes a far more analytical approach than everyday problem solving, it emphasizes the use of tailor-made non-traditional responses, and it assesses impact. Judging by the data collected in San Diego, full-scale POP is rare. Even large police departments do well if they can find two or three POP projects per year worthy of nomination for the Herman Goldstein Award. Doing POP is clearly more challenging and demanding than doing everyday problem solving.

The most fervent and committed advocates of problem-oriented policing argue that every officer can and should be engaged in POP. Based on this study of a police department that has emphasized POP for over a decade, however, it seems more realistic to expect every officer to engage in problem solving. If this more modest expectation is accepted, though, agencies should still create the capacity for POP, through some combination of training, specialized assignments, or the creation of a specialized unit. When a medium- or large-scale problem is identified, careful analysis followed by tailor-made responses remains the most promising strategy available to police today.

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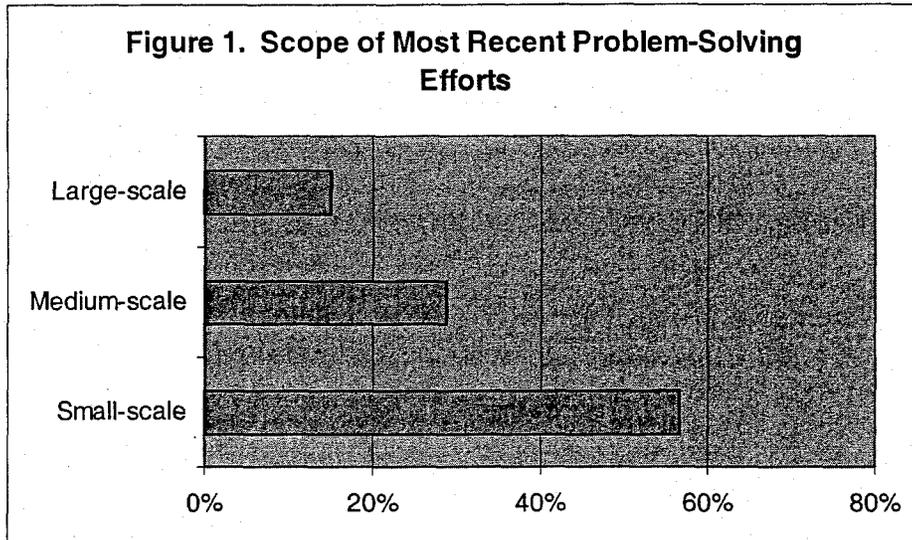
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Table 1. Modern Police Strategies

	Reactive Policing	Proactive Policing	Community Policing	Problem-Oriented Policing
Primary Objective	Rapid response to calls	Law enforcement	Positive police-community relations	Solving recurring problems
Core Functions	Call handling, investigations	Stops, arrests	Community engagement	Problem solving (SARA model)
Distinguishing Characteristics	Reactive, responsive	Proactive, aggressive	Collaborative, preventive	Analytical, creative
Measures of Success	Process – response time Impact – clearance rate	Process – citations, arrests Impact – crime rate	Process – meetings, contacts Impact – public opinion, fear of crime	Process – problems addressed Impact – problems reduced



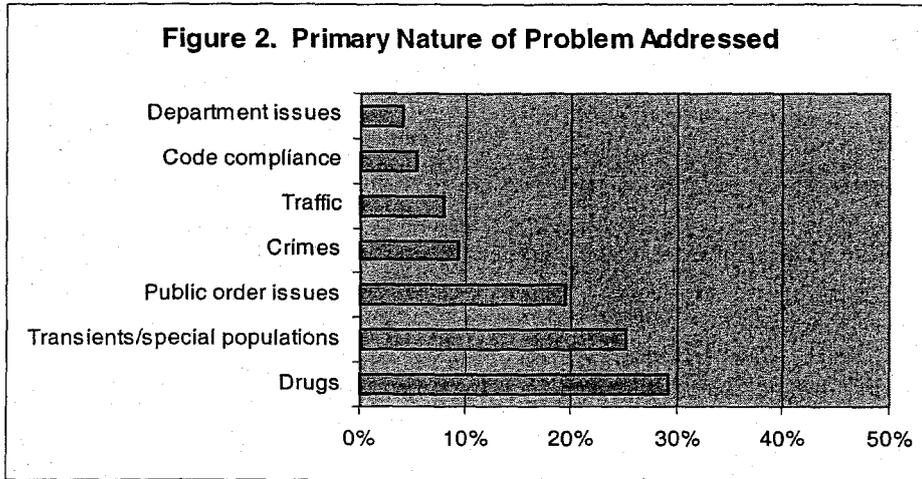
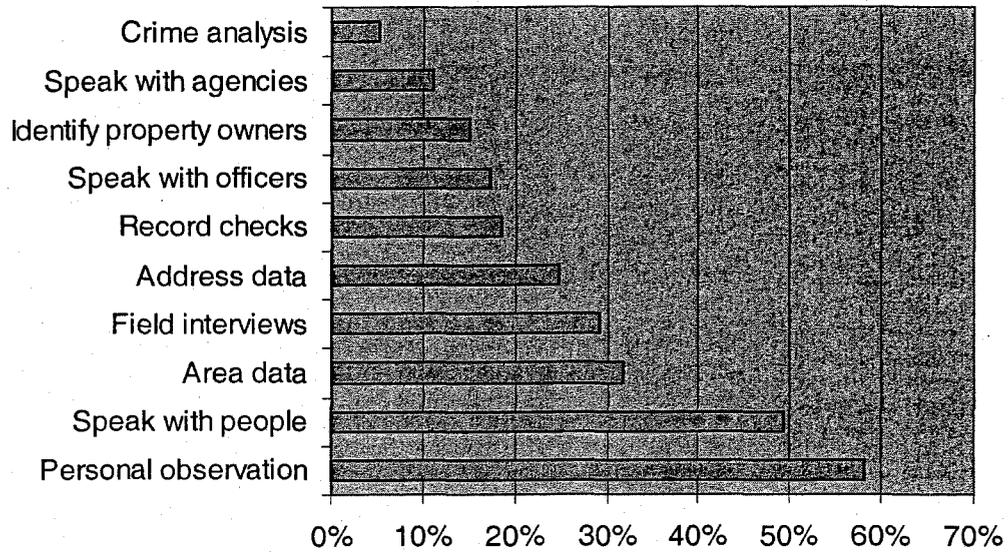


Figure 3. Sources of Information Used to Analyze the Problem (top 10 responses).



**Figure 4. Response Strategies Utilized in POP Projects
(top 9 responses)**

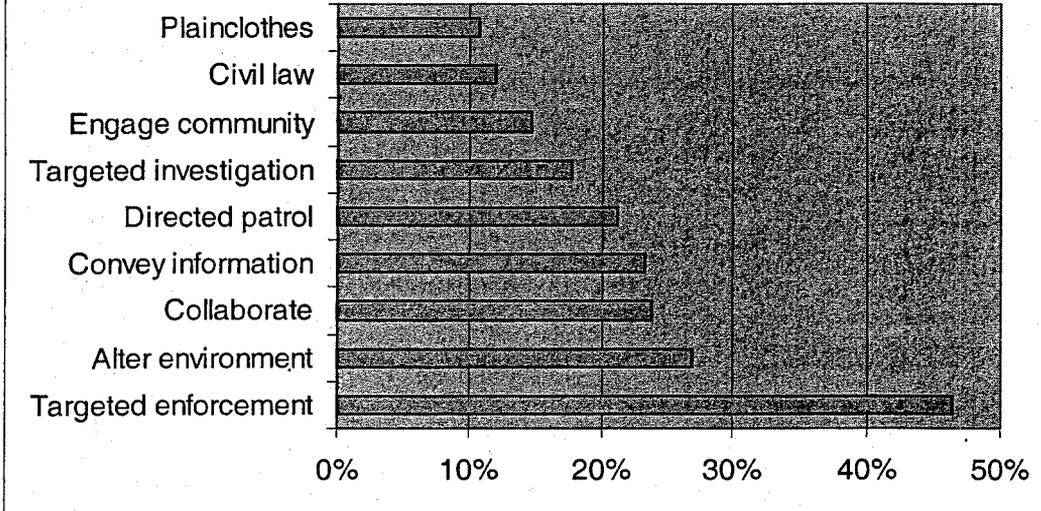


Figure 5. Suggestions for Providing More Support for POP (top 9 responses)

