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TECHNICAL REPORT

Community Policing and Crime

The Process and Impact of Problem-Solving in Oakland

Jeremy M. Wilson, Amy G. Cox

Sponsored by the City of Oakland

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Summary

Introduction

Increases in violent crime in the early 2000s caused a great deal of concern among Oakland, California, residents and policymakers. In response, in November 2004, Oakland voters passed a ballot measure that created the Violence Prevention and Public Safety Act (also known as Measure Y), which provides $19.9 million per year for violence-prevention programs, 63 new police officers focused on community and neighborhood policing services, and an independent evaluation of the measure.

This report summarizes RAND's assessment of Measure Y–funded community-policing efforts through September 2008, expanding on the first-year process—or implementation—analysis and examining the effectiveness of community policing as implemented through the problem-solving officer (PSO) program. To conduct the analysis, we relied on four sources of information: (1) a Web-based survey of PSOs; (2) an assessment of PSO deployment data used to summarize the deployment, stability, and coverage of the PSOs; (3) official crime statistics from January 1, 1998, through April 30, 2008, used to form two crime measures for each PSO beat—violent crime and property crime—which, in turn, were used as outcome variables in interrupted time series analyses; and (4) semistructured interviews and focus groups with Oakland Police Department (OPD) staff.

Key Findings

Much progress has been made in implementing the PSO program in the second evaluation year, but such progress has not been associated with a reduction in violent or property crime. Overall, there was no statistical evidence that the PSO program is associated with reductions in crime and violence.

There are four possible explanations: (1) the program is not effective; (2) there are positive outcomes that the evaluation does not capture; (3) the program is associated with an increased propensity to report crime, thus off-setting crime reductions; or (4) implementation challenges preclude the program's ability to be effective. It is plausible that the efforts of the PSOs do not directly translate into crime reductions. There could be many reasons for this. For instance, the program theory could be flawed such that the specific actions of the PSOs, even when successful, are unrelated to crime prevention. Alternatively, it is possible that the work of a single PSO, while successful, is simply not sufficient to affect crime levels. This suggests a "dosage" problem and perhaps the need for more PSOs to realize a measurable reduction in crime. While it is entirely possible that PSOs do not impact crime, we cannot make such a determination with

any degree of certainty, given current implementation challenges that undermine the ability of PSO deployment to affect property and violent crime rates, even if the problem-solving that is being conducted is successful. This will be more discernible in the future, assuming that the implementation of the PSO program improves.

The second possible explanation is that the evaluation did not capture the ultimate success of problem-solving efforts. Our analysis considered indexes of violent and property crime. It is possible that effects could be detected using other official statistics, such as individual crime or disorder measures, or even measures based on stakeholder perceptions, such as resident assessment of problem-solving efforts, fear of crime, or quality of life in the beat. Because Measure Y's overarching goal is to reduce crime and violence, the city's interest in assessing the impact of the PSOs on index crime, PSOs' ability to address problems theoretically and empirically related to crime, and the greater likelihood for index crime to be reported—broad measures used to assess PSOs' ultimate effectiveness in addressing these issues—figured heavily in our analysis. However, given the broad and diverse work of PSOs, the PSO program could be associated with positive outcomes pertaining to individual and intermediate outcomes that contribute to the ultimate reduction of violence but do not do so directly.

It is also possible that the outcome models estimated did not have enough statistical power to detect small or moderate effect sizes in the outcome variables. In beats where the PSO was deployed for a shorter period, the statistical power to detect a program effect is smaller because there are fewer postdeployment observations on which to estimate an effect. This potential problem can be addressed in future assessments by replicating these models after the PSOs have been working in their communities for longer periods, thereby creating a larger postdeployment sample.

The third explanation is that the success of PSOs resulted in an increased likelihood to report crime, thereby offsetting statistical reductions. Some support for this comes from the PSO survey results: Nearly half of the PSOs believed that community faith in the police and individual willingness to report crime have increased since their deployment. Unfortunately, it is impossible to determine with any degree of certainty the extent to which changes in crime reporting offset actual crime reductions achieved by the PSOs.

The final explanation—that implementation challenges may preclude the ability of the PSO program to demonstrate success (assuming that it is effective) at this point—seems the most probable. Despite much progress in the problem-solving unit during this evaluation year, key implementation issues remain that could jeopardize problem-solving effectiveness: (1) the amount of problem-solving coverage that each beat receives, (2) the need for PSOs to "team up" on problem-solving in each other's beats, (3) the number of problems a given PSO addresses at any one time (an average of 32), (4) limited collaboration outside OPD, and (5) the instability of PSO assignments.

A few management issues also surfaced that could hinder the implementation and ultimate effectiveness of the PSO program—issues that point to the incentives that PSOs perceive with regard to their positions. In particular, some PSOs do not feel that they are evaluated accurately, and some do not desire to remain in their current positions. The final management issue pertains to the fact that documentation of PSO efforts is not standard or consistent across geographic areas, which may impede the ability of PSO commanders to monitor PSO activities, thereby limiting their ability to oversee and facilitate their efforts while also raising questions about the ability of PSO commanders to evaluate PSOs consistently. It should also be noted that the effectiveness of individual PSOs will likely increase as they gain more PSO

experience, particularly if they remain assigned to a single beat where they can build strong community partnerships. Those responding to the survey had, on average, about eight years of experience as police officers and two years of experience as PSOs.

Policy Implications

These findings suggest the following policy recommendations: (1) assess the adequacy of staffing to determine the extent to which OPD needs additional staff or whether some other kind of reallocation of resources might improve problem-solving; (2) create a uniform problem-tracking system and monitor problem-solving efforts to promote problem management and evaluation; (3) actively consider ways to stabilize the PSO assignments and work with communities to soften transitions when they occur; (4) maximize stakeholder involvement and the use of existing resources, given that community participation in the problem-solving process continues to be less than ideal; (5) maximize incentives for PSOs with the goal of improving productivity and reducing attrition, thereby contributing to PSO stability, problem-solving effectiveness, and improved police-community relations; and (6) find ways to leverage Measure Y dollars to equip the officers with vehicles as quickly as possible.