

# **A PROBLEM ORIENTED AND PARTNERSHIP POLICING (POPP) APPROACH TO VOLATILE SUBSTANCE MISUSE**

Amanda Moran, Information and Training Officer  
Queensland Police Service

*Paper presented at the  
Inhalant Use and Disorder Conference  
convened by the Australian Institute of Criminology  
and held in Townsville, 7-8 July 2003*

## **Introduction**

In various locations throughout Queensland, police officers have become involved with their local community to address a growing issue of concern. The incidents of volatile substance misuse (VSM) in several areas of Queensland have been increasing over the last five years. Unfortunately there is very little hard data to support these views. However anecdotal evidence from a range of sources has confirmed this increase.

A Queensland Police Service (QPS) internal survey (unpublished) of selected officers throughout the state found that 73% of police respondents identified VSM as a problem in their area. VSM was seen as a bigger concern in the Northern Region (including Townsville and Mt Isa Districts), South Eastern Region (Logan and Gold Coast) and specialist areas such as the Railway Squad (operating on the Brisbane urban train service).

Information gathered as part of the *Statewide Scan on Volatile Substance Misuse in Queensland* project, being conducted by Community Solutions in conjunction with the QPS has provided a similar picture. Workshops have been conducted in ten locations throughout the state and have provided an overview of the scope of the problem in each area. Issues surrounding who is using, where, what and why they are using have all been discussed. The workshops also worked towards identifying local strategies to address the problem.

In this paper, I will discuss how the QPS is using problem oriented and partnership policing (POPP) strategies to address VSM issues, and the similarities between this approach and the Commission for Children and Young People's community engagement strategy. I will also highlight how Queensland police are moving away from only reacting to VSM incidents by mentioning some of the relevant POPP strategies and other initiatives that have been implemented. An overview of the QPS involvement in addressing VSM from a statewide perspective will also be discussed. In conclusion, I will briefly examine possible future directions of the QPS in ensuring the most effective and efficient response to the VSM issue.

## **Overview of POPP**

In the past, police have been called upon to respond to calls for service as quickly as possible. This made most conventional police work reactive and incident-driven. This type of response has had limited effectiveness as a strategy to deal with the actual causes of incidents.

In responding to criticism by various external reviews of the QPS for relying too heavily on reactive policing strategies, the use of POPP strategies has been promoted within the QPS over a number of years through the provision of dedicated resources to assist police and through the support of the senior executive.

Problem oriented policing is not a new concept having been initially developed in the late 1970's by Professor Herman Goldstein in the United States. Problem oriented policing is a systematic and targeted approach to analysing and addressing crime trends and associated community problems. It entails identifying common characteristics between incidents, analysing their underlying causes and sources, developing responses and solutions and evaluating the outcomes of these responses. This type of response to any policing concern can assist by increasing police effectiveness in solving crime and involving the community in the prevention of crime.

As a practical application of Goldstein's concept, problem solving is a method of police inquiry that involves the examination of current and developing trends in crime and other threats to community safety and security. Problem solving is not intended to take the place of reactive policing but rather enhance the capacity of police to provide more effective policing services by attacking some of the underlying causes of crime.

The Scanning Analysis Response Assessment (SARA) model is now used by the QPS to support police in applying POPP and problem solving approaches to local issues. While not the only model that can be used for problem solving, SARA can be used effectively in managing an incident response or to design a project. SARA, with the component parts of scanning, analysis, response, and assessment, is similar to the seven-stage community engagement strategy suggested by the Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) in addressing VSM in Queensland.

The scanning stage of the SARA model is essential in identifying current or potential policing problems. A problem is defined as a “cluster of similar or related incidents that are of substantive concern to the community and the police”(QPS Guide to POPP). There are four types of policing problems: chronic problems, flare-up problems, continual low-level problems and close-proximity problems. Information about the problem can come from a range of sources including the public, community groups, government and business leaders, local media and police sources. A scanning report, providing a brief statement of the problem, a description of the location of the problem and an assessment of the seriousness of the problem should be compiled at this stage.

Stage two of SARA, the analysis, is used to pinpoint the underlying conditions that are contributing to incidents. The main focus of this stage is to develop a better understanding of what the problem is, identify competing interests, needs, demands and expectations, identify options and place the QPS in the best position to manage the problem fairly, efficiently and effectively. A key point for the analysis stage is to ensure that sufficient data is used. This is sometimes difficult, and is particularly so with VSM as there is limited reliable data available to support any analysis. The key elements most common to policing problems that should be analysed are usually persons, events and place. Following the analysis of all these elements and data, a problem statement is usually formulated to clearly define the problem and identify any potential causes of the problem.

In undertaking the response stage of SARA, it is necessary to formulate an objective which is realistic and which might establish a performance indicator for the response. It is also necessary as part of this stage to identify the range of potential responses to the problem. The strategies identified may vary greatly in number and degree of difficulty. Any response should aim to be problem specific and designed to precisely fit a particular problem. Generalised responses tend to be less effective. The final part of the response stage is to implement the identified response/s by developing an implementation plan which outlines what the problem is, the objective/s of the response, other stakeholders involved and their roles, the time frame for the response and a listing of resources required to undertake the response, including the data required to assess the response.

The final stage of the problem solving process is to assess whether the strategies used to resolve the problem have achieved a desired outcome. Through basic impact and process evaluation it can be determined if the response has achieved its stated objective and if the response went as planned. Planning for the assessment stage throughout the problem solving process will assist in completing the assessment.

Having briefly discussed the use of the SARA model in the QPS to develop POPP initiatives, it is worthy at this point to identify the links between SARA and the Commission for Children and Young People’s seven-stage community engagement strategy that was proposed in their September 2002 report, *Volatile Substance Misuse in Queensland*.

The table below links up the different stages of both models to show their similarities. The only stage that differs in location is the second stage of the CCYP model, forming an action committee, which would usually be undertaken in the “response” phase of the SARA model.

Seven Stage Community Engagement Strategy – CCYP	Queensland Police Service SARA Model
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identify a VSM problem</li> <li>2. Forming an action committee</li> <li>3. Developing VSM profile</li> <li>4. Identify community assets</li> <li>5. Develop strategies</li> <li>6. Implementing &amp; communicating</li> <li>7. Monitoring &amp; evaluating</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Scanning</li> <li>2. Analysis</li> <li>3. Response</li> <li>4. Assessment</li> </ol>

## Police Responses to VSM

In examining police responses to VSM throughout Queensland, there have been a number of POPP initiatives conducted over the years examining this issue. There are also officers in various locations involved in addressing VSM without officially registering their work as POPP initiatives.

Locations which have had identified VSM initiatives or police involvement in local action include:

- Mt Gravatt
- Inala
- Fortitude Valley
- West End
- Brisbane City
- Ipswich
- Rockhampton
- Gladstone & Biloela
- Townsville
- Doomadgee
- Mt Isa
- Mareeba
- Innisfail
- Charters Towers
- Mackay
- Bamaga & Thursday Island

This list is not exhaustive but does provide an indication of the vast spread of activity throughout Queensland. Papers on several of these initiatives are being presented at this conference.

While it is not possible to provide an overview for each initiative in this paper, it is possible to draw some conclusions as to the type of activities undertaken across the range of initiatives. In general, activities or initiatives that police become involved in when responding to VSM usually involve one or more of the following:

- Involvement in a local committee, usually incorporating representatives from a range of other government and non-government agencies to address VSM concerns.
- Provision of referral information for the young people that police come into contact with when such services are available.
- Involvement in discussions with local retailers regarding supply reduction and staff safety issues.
- Increased patrols or enforcement of the legislation regarding the removal of volatile substances being misused (under section 371A of the *Police Powers and Responsibilities Act 2000*).
- Development of local protocols or memoranda of understanding between police and other agencies (in particular hospitals) in responding to VSM incidents.
- Involvement in or assistance with the provision of diversion activities for young people including camps, sporting activities or cultural activities.

It is also important to note the wide range of officers that have been involved in these initiatives including officers from the Juvenile Aid Bureau, crime prevention officers, School Based Police Officers, Police Citizen Youth Club officers, general duty officers and Police Liaison Officers.

## **State Wide Issues**

In supporting Queensland Police Service officers, there are a number of actions occurring at a statewide level.

Through the Queensland Drug Coordinating Committee (QDCC), which consists of senior representatives from a wide range of government departments, a Volatile Substance Misuse Steering Group was established to develop a whole of government response to VSM. This group, with representatives from a selection of appropriate government departments, has the following roles:

- Examine factors contributing to VSM in Queensland;
- Review existing strategies in Queensland and in other jurisdictions to address VSM;
- Consider best practice strategies to address VSM identified through consultation processes;
- Identify policy and service delivery issues that require a cross departmental response;
- Respond to QDCC requests in relation to VSM issues;
- Advise on policy direction for a whole of government response to address VSM which may include legislative changes;
- Advise on resource and priority issues required for policy and service delivery responses to respond to VSM;
- Develop options and make recommendations to QDCC in response to VSM; and
- Contribute to the development of the Cabinet Submission for consideration on the whole of government response.

It is anticipated that the work undertaken by this Steering Group will go before the Queensland Cabinet within the next two months for consideration.

Another issue that may directly affect police involvement in VSM incidents is the proposed amendments to legislation to assist police to respond effectively to such incidents. A proposal has been forwarded to the Police Powers and Responsibilities Act Review Committee that is intended to help ensure the safety of young people affected by volatile substances by providing police with appropriate powers. Any legislative change allowing police to take young people affected to a place of safety would be hampered by the lack of “safe places” willing to take intoxicated young people. There is also the likelihood that young people, being taken to a “safe place” by police could be aggressive and obstructionist and that could lead to the young person being charged with other offences. As with reviews of legislative options in other areas of Australia, the QPS is not supportive of making VSM an offence.

In order to improve the reactive response to VSM incidents, the QPS and the Queensland Ambulance Service are working towards the development of an immediate response protocol to improve both services’ responses to incidents. This protocol will improve the understanding of officers from both organisations as to their role and responsibility in responding to VSM incidents. The protocol will also incorporate aspects relating to Queensland Health, in particular when local hospitals are involved as part of the response to an incident. In conjunction with the development of the immediate response protocols, it is recognised that there is a need to improve training for police and ambulance officers to ensure the effective introduction of the protocols. A major

component of any training developed will be the need to highlight the importance of improved referral pathways to ensure people police come into contact with can be referred to appropriate support or treatment services.

It has already been identified that there is a lack of data regarding VSM incidents. The QPS is addressing this issue through the development of improved data collection methods.

While the development of a statewide response to VSM is important, it is also imperative that local action is supported from the state level. The importance of utilising a community engagement model appears to be particularly relevant in addressing VSM concerns and has been supported by all the reviews or inquiries into the issue in Australia in recent times.

### **Current Support for Police**

While there is substantial work to be done to assist Queensland police to respond to VSM incidents in various areas of the state, a number of actions have already been undertaken to support officers. Up-to-date information on VSM is available to all officers on the QPS intra-net, through the Bulletin Board. Through the Drug and Alcohol Community Education Resource (DACER), police can access information about effects, sudden sniffing death syndrome, legal issues and other general facts about volatile substances.

Internal correspondence in a number of regions and at a statewide level is assisting in increasing awareness of the issues surrounding police responses to VSM incidents. This includes raising awareness of the possibility of sudden sniffing death syndrome.

Through the QPS's Drug and Alcohol Coordination area, links with other states and territories ensure that Queensland officers are aware of issues other jurisdictions are dealing with in relation to VSM.

There has also been a training project, the *Statewide Scan on Volatile Substance Misuse in Queensland* project, undertaken by Community Solutions Inc. in conjunction with the QPS, to conduct a number of training workshops around Queensland based on the community engagement model. Ten workshops have currently been conducted which have engaged a large number of officers and other agency workers to discuss VSM and formulate local responses. Information about this project is also being presented at this conference.

### **The Way Forward**

In looking to the future, there are a number of facets of the Queensland Police Service's response to VSM that require continued support and development.

Improved access to training and information for police throughout the state is vital. A significant outcome from the *Statewide Scan on Volatile Substance Misuse in Queensland* project will be the development and implementation of an electronic resource providing substantial information on VSM. Joint training initiatives with the Queensland Ambulance Service are also proposed with the development of the immediate response protocols.

Accurate data on VSM incidents is essential to prepare appropriate responses to these incidents. The importance of this data will ensure that the issue of data collection by the QPS and other agencies receives appropriate attention in the near future.

It is also envisaged that the QPS will continue to play a role in the development of statewide initiatives to respond to VSM. However, while these statewide responses are important, it is the response of the local officers, at a local level, that will continue to play a major role in assisting the community to address their concerns for people who use volatile substances. These officers, using their POPP approach, will contribute to these local initiatives in conjunction with other concerned government and non-government local workers and the community as a whole.