

Problem-Oriented Policing: A Team Approach

*Jennifer West
Senior Research Officer
Special Projects Section
South Australia Police*

This paper will show how the idea of using a problem-oriented approach to policing (POP) was developed, and will then discuss the trial of problem-oriented policing. Finally, a brief overview of the techniques used to evaluate the trial and how problem-oriented policing works in practice will be given.

Background

A fundamental development was made in crime prevention in North America in the late 1970s by Herman Goldstein (1979) when he began researching a problem-oriented approach to policing. According to Goldstein, the public wants to see improved management of a wide range of behavioural and social problems such as residential burglaries, domestic violence, vandalism and robberies. These problems are currently addressed by a series of law enforcement techniques. Goldstein suggested that police focus much of their time and energy on matters other than crime prevention such as the large amount of paperwork associated with the reporting of offences.

Eck and Spelman (1987) carried out extensive research into problem-oriented policing and suggest that police have traditionally treated calls for assistance or service as individual episodes. Their research has shown that what appears to be an isolated incident can, in fact, be connected to a series of events—a cycle that may lead to repeated calls for police attention.

To improve service to the community, Goldstein, Eck and Spelman suggest that police must develop a more systematic way of processing the problems of the community they serve. This includes not only crime problems but any persistent problems that affect the community. To this end, a problem-solving proactive strategy was proposed, in addition to the reactive

mode of responding to incidents and calls for help after the fact. This strategy involves four principles.

Firstly, that police use their extensive knowledge of the local environment to identify patterns of crime, often associated with certain locations, which can then be defined as problems-the scan phase.

Secondly, in order to understand the underlying causes of an identified problem, police can collect and analyse as much information about the problem as possible, both from sources within and outside the department-the analysis phase.

Thirdly, by grouping incidents or offences together, officers can analyse the underlying conditions that contribute to a problem, and can then develop and implement a potential solution. This may involve research into the nature of the current police response to the problem, to assess its adequacy, and then, based on their experience in police work, a range of possible alternative responses which may solve the underlying problem should be explored. The underlying causes of these problems can then be systematically dealt with. As the causes of most crime lay beyond the normal boundaries of police work, development of solutions would usually involve other agencies and, in many cases, the community in general-the response phase.

The fourth step in the problem-oriented approach is the assessment phase, where implemented solutions are assessed to determine their effectiveness. This assessment may be accomplished through simple observation or through a complex evaluation process. If the first response failed, the information gained through assessment would be used to change the response, improve the analysis and, in some cases, to redefine the nature of the problem.

The Trial of Problem-Oriented Policing

The impact of the problem-oriented approach to policing in North America has been so encouraging that, when Dr Adam Sutton developed the South Australian Government's Together Against Crime Strategy, he recommended that a pilot scheme be implemented and systematically evaluated within an operational area of the South Australia Police Department. This recommendation was supported by the South Australia Police Department as problem-oriented policing (POP) meshes well with the community policing strategy which the Department embraced in 1984.

When considering where the South Australia Police Department should trial POP it was important to choose an area with a reasonably high workload and range of socio-demographic conditions. Para Hills Sub-division met these criteria. In terms of workload, Para Hills has the second highest level of taskings in the metropolitan area. The Para Hills Police Sub-division has similar boundaries to the Salisbury Local Government Area and is located about 18 kilometres north of Adelaide. The trial area is approximately 120 square kilometres in size with a population in excess of 96,000 people. A wide cross-section of socioeconomic lifestyles are also represented in this fast growing council area. The POP trial commenced in September 1990 and concluded in December 1991. Five Patrol Teams serve the Salisbury Council area and each team is made up of ten patrol officers, one Senior Constable, and one Sergeant.

Trial objectives

On completion of the trial, all Para Hills based patrol officers will have participated in a two-day training seminar on POP techniques. This training, in conjunction with the support of the Project Management Team, will enable patrol officers to develop an understanding of POP and become capable of incorporating these techniques into patrol work practices.

Patrol officers will become more operationally effective through the addition of POP methods to their current range of policing techniques. This means that patrol officers should be able to use POP techniques to solve some of the problems which have previously resulted in recurrent taskings to that location. Police officers will also become more adept in liaison with outside groups and agencies in their efforts to solve problems identified using POP techniques and this should have advantages for all aspects of their work.

During the trial, patrol officers and representatives from other agencies should increasingly work together to solve the problems which lead to criminal activity in the community. This may begin to shift ownership of crime prevention from the police alone, to the police with other agencies, and the community. Patrol officers should feel satisfied that POP is an effective and valuable method of policing by the end of the trial period. In other words, police officers should know that POP works.

Members of the public who have been in contact with police during the trial of POP should be satisfied that the POP method of policing is at least as effective, if not more effective, than current policing techniques. The police are likely to receive positive feedback from the wider community through the implementation of problem solving activities and through public evaluation surveys.

Evaluation techniques

Before and after evaluation

Before and after statistics will be collected on the number and type of patrol taskings to a POP location. Using the centrally-located Computer Aided Dispatch System, computer print-outs are provided of the number of taskings by time of day and day of week for any location. The data contained in these print-outs can provide information about a problem location before, during and after the implementation of a POP solution. These print-outs will thus enable comparisons to be made regarding the frequency and timing of patrol movements to POP locations and the activities of the patrol once in the POP location.

Similarly, collators' records of the number of arrests and reports made at POP locations before, during and after the implementation of a potential solution will enable comparisons to be made.

The Crime Mapping System will be used to compare levels of crime in the Para Hills Sub-division to the entire Metropolitan Area. Alternatively, smaller areas within the Para Hills Sub-division can be compared to each other. Crime Maps can be used to show the changing levels of particular offences in areas as small as an Australian Bureau of Statistics census collector district, or an area as large as an Local Government Area or Police Division. In addition, such maps can demonstrate whether offences have been displaced to surrounding areas.

Patrol officers will be asked to list and rate (on a scale of 1 - 5) the types of deviant behaviours regularly exhibited at POP locations. This will enable the collective opinions of police officers in the Para Hills Sub-division to be used to determine whether a problem is reducing, increasing or remaining static after the implementation of a potential solution.

Participant evaluation

Police officers will be surveyed about their attitudes to POP as a policing technique. This self-reporting survey will assist in determining:

- if patrol officers understand what POP is and how it can be used in their patrol environment;
- how effective patrol officers believe POP is, or could be, as a method of policing;
- how effective patrol officers believe they are at liaison with outside organisations/agencies;
- how satisfied patrol officers are with POP; and
- what problems patrol officers have had in using POP.

Client (public) evaluation

The techniques used to carry out client evaluation (or how the public feel about POP) will differ slightly for each case study/POP location. Possible techniques could include:

- a before and after survey;
- a needs assessment survey;
- a perceived change survey; and
- before and after interviews.

For example, before and after interviews might be used when the client group is made up of a small group of residents who live in close proximity to a problem location.

Government and other agencies in the trial area will also be contacted and asked if they have had any contact with police about a POP problem. If so, they will be asked about the frequency and quality of such contact.

Process evaluation

Finally process evaluation information will be obtained from:

- a case study diary. This diary will link changes in the statistics with the activities of the teams at POP locations. It will be supplemented by anecdotal information. In addition, time will be spent with each team to provide advice on evaluation matters, and feedback

- information about what POP responses worked well for other teams and what did not; and
- minutes of meetings team members have had with representatives from outside agencies. These minutes are kept by team members as an evaluation or assessment tool. Team members will use the minutes as a record of what they did at each phase of the POP process.

Problem-Oriented Policing in Practice*

Since 1984, in line with the new philosophies of Commissioner Hunt, community policing was given a high profile within the South Australia Police Department. Community policing puts emphasis on the partnership of the community with the police and aims to prevent crime through the creation of confident communities who work in cooperation with the police. The police consult with the community and respond to its needs with the aim of getting the community to take responsibility for its own safety and security.

POP brings together the four policing strategies (reactive, proactive, community and POP). To introduce this innovative policing concept, police departments must examine their style of management. The current way most police departments function is legalistic or paramilitary and suits reactive and proactive policing techniques. The paramilitary model does not, however, sit well with community policing or POP. The highly centralised style of command currently in force requires police to have an impersonal attitude towards the public and its problems, and stresses the influence of authority to accomplish tasks. Community policing and POP requires police to move towards becoming service-oriented. This approach operates with a decentralised style of command using proactive, preventative and deterrent strategies. Police become personally involved with the public and their problems, and persuasion with subtle authority is used to accomplish tasks.

POP, therefore, requires some risk taking on behalf of management. POP allows the grassroots patrol officer the autonomy to identify a problem, analyse the problem and determine its cause, and then develop potential solutions to the problem without being required to follow the correct procedure through police hierarchy before acting.

The South Australia Police Department's trial of POP uses a team format, which is the first trial of this type in Australia and possibly the world. Four of the five Para Hills Patrol Teams have received specific training in POP techniques and have begun tackling problems in the Para Hills Sub-division. In this paper, however, only the efforts of Team 3 and Team 1 will be discussed.

Salisbury Interchange

Team 3 was the first team to be trained in POP techniques. On the completion of training, various problems within the Para Hills Sub-division were identified. Of these problems, the Salisbury Interchange was chosen as Team 3's first target.

The Salisbury Interchange is a location near the Salisbury Community and Business Centre where trains and buses meet. It is a focal area for children and adults alike. As such, it is also an area of high crime including street offences, illegal use (car theft or damage), and robbery with violence.

When completing the analysis and response phase of the POP approach to the Salisbury Interchange, Team 3 decided to break down the Salisbury Interchange problem into sections, as it is a large problem with many contributing factors.

The first area to be examined by Team 3 was the high level of illegal use of cars. Approximately 11 per cent of all cars stolen within the Para Hills Sub-division in 1990 were stolen in and around the Salisbury Interchange. Team 3 met with numerous agencies to identify key groups which should work with the police to solve the Salisbury Interchange problem. The key groups identified were the State Transport Authority, the Salisbury Council and interested residents.

A simple solution put forward by Team 3 involved fencing off part of the carpark and providing a security officer, paid through charging a nominal fee for the parking of vehicles within the area. As an interim measure, the State Transport Authority supplied a guard and a dog to patrol the area between Thursday and Sunday evenings. This interim measure has substantially reduced the number of vehicles stolen from this location and it is expected that the secure carpark will further improve matters.

In looking at the Salisbury Interchange itself, Team 3 identified that the only persons who used the underpass beneath the railway line were offenders. These people used the underpass to conceal themselves before rushing out and grabbing handbags or assaulting people. The offenders then used the tunnel as an escape route. Team 3 discussed this with the Salisbury Council who then organised to have the underpass sealed with concrete. The design of the underpass area was also examined for other places where potential offenders could conceal themselves. As a result, Team 3 again consulted with the Council to have trees and shrubs trimmed in the vicinity. Team 3 have also suggested that the solid partitions (or weather shields) between train and bus platforms be replaced with clear perspex, or be removed completely, to further reduce hiding places and to minimise graffiti within the area.

Team 3 examined their records of the number of times patrols have been tasked to the Salisbury Interchange for the three months before the initiative commenced and for the three months after. Despite the fact that crime statistics at the Interchange over three winter months were being compared with three summer months when offences normally increase, to their delight Team 3 found that all offences except one had decreased. The one offence that did increase was larceny: there were three larcenies before POP was introduced and four larcenies afterwards.

Team 3 particularly enjoyed the client evaluation aspect of the POP trial. A perceived needs survey was conducted in November 1990 at the Salisbury

Interchange to determine what problems the public had experienced at the Interchange. The community responded very positively to this survey. They supported the police initiative to enclose the carpark and indicated that they would be willing to pay a small weekly charge to ensure that their car was safe while left at the Interchange carpark.

Team 3 were pleasantly surprised by the high level of support for the police shown by the community. As police generally deal with the worst segments of the community, this experience was valuable in building confidence and the desire to work more closely with the local population. It also made the team members feel more positive about themselves both personally and as a Team.

Gotcha Cars

Team 1, after their POP training, identified the problem of the high number of VN and VB Commodore motor vehicles being stolen from the Salisbury area. POP encourages patrol officers to identify new and innovative ways of solving problems and, through Chief Inspector Nixon of the New South Wales Police, Team 1 heard of a system called 'Gotcha Cars'.

The Gotcha Cars concept is being trialled in Britain, Europe, and New South Wales with some measure of success. Instead of chasing offenders after a car has been stolen, the technology used in Gotcha Cars allows police to detect the offence as it occurs. The 'Gotcha Car' looks identical to any other VN or VB Commodore but has significant modifications. When an offender attempts to steal the car, the doors lock into position with steel bars, shatterproof windows shut, a kill switch on the motor ensures that the motor will not start, and the brakes are locked into position so the vehicle will not move. At the same time an alarm is set off within the vehicle which activates a pager on a nearby police officer. The police officer then approaches the vehicle, unlocks it and apprehends the offender(s).

Team 1 believe that the Gotcha Cars concept is a far safer method of catching car theft offenders. In addition, word of mouth and publicity about the use of Gotcha Cars should substantially reduce the number of VN and VB Commodores being stolen. The number of high speed chases should also reduce. As such chases involve life-threatening behaviour for offenders, police and the wider community, this would also be a great benefit.

Conclusion

POP brings with it new forms of accountability and allows structured discretion or the use of the best judgment. POP puts less emphasis on whether actions are in accordance with rules and more emphasis on organisational values and ethics. POP also requires management to move away from issuing commands and toward participation management which also reinforces the autonomy of individual officers. New meaning is given to the concept of police professionalism, emphasising flexibility, interpersonal skills and problem solving abilities.

The way success in policing is measured also changes. In the past, performance of police was judged in terms of the number of arrests made. POP measures success in terms of problems solved, and police officers are

rewarded both through personal satisfaction and through positive feedback from the community.

Another benefit of POP is the increasing levels of partnership between the police, other organisations and community groups. This cooperation will provide a wider range of possibilities in solving crime and related problems.

POP also intermeshes with the Together Against Crime Committees being established in various locations around Adelaide. One of these committees-the Salisbury Together Against Crime group-has already been involved with POP activities.

POP will work and it is hoped that, on the completion of the trial period, the POP concept will be extended and utilised throughout the South Australia Police Department.

References

Eck, J.E. & Spelman, W. 1987, Newport News Tests Problem-Oriented Policing, U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, Washington DC.

Goldstein, H. 1979, 'Improving Policing: A Problem Oriented Approach', Crime and Delinquency, vol. 25, April, pp. 236-58.

* This part of the paper was delivered by Inspector Al Thomson, Officer in Charge, Para Hills Sub-division, South Australia Police Department.