
Problem-Oriented Policing and Drug Enforcement in Newport News

William P. Mitchell

"Without problem-oriented policing, the city's Police Department is understaffed by approximately 90 police officers for a city its size," said Police Chief Jay Carey, during a budget workshop with the Newport News city council.

Chief Carey's comments reveal his confidence in the modern law enforcement concept known as problem-oriented policing (POP). POP has moderated the need for increases in the number of police officers in Newport News, Virginia, an industrial city that has grown in population from 150,000 to 170,000 in 10 years. Problem-oriented policing is a framework for solving crimes that generate repeated calls to the police, usually to a distinct section of a community. It has been used in Newport News to solve such crime problems as burglaries, robberies, and prostitution, and the concept has proven to be an effective tool in enforcing laws against the possession and sale of illicit drugs.

Background of POP

Problem-oriented policing was conceived in 1979 by Professor Herman Goldstein, of the University of Wisconsin. Former Police Chief Darrel Stephens brought it to Newport News in 1984 through a grant from the Police Executive Research Forum.

POP is characterized by a four-phase problem-solving process to eliminate the causes of crimes:

1. *Scanning:* The officer identifies an issue and determines if it is, in fact, really a problem

2. *Analysis:* The officer collects information to determine the scope, nature, and causes of the problem
3. *Response:* Information gathered during the analysis is used to develop and implement solutions
4. *Assessment:* Officers evaluate the effectiveness of the response.

The central element of the process is the problem analysis, which breaks problem events into three components:

1. *Actors:* Victims, offenders, and others involved in events
2. *Incidents:* The social context, physical setting, and actions taken before, during, and after events
3. *Responses:* The perceptions and responses of citizens and private and public institutions to the problem.

The object of the analysis is to produce solutions to the problem, which constitute the response element of the POP process. An assessment of the solution is also provided in the process to evaluate the solution's effectiveness.

POP presumes that all members of a police agency are familiar with problem solving or can apply the problem-solving process. It does not require that problem solving be performed by special units, nor does it require additional resources for implementation. In fact, the creation of a Problem Analysis Committee (PAC) is the only change the

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Newport News Police Department made in its structure to accommodate problem-oriented policing. PAC includes officers from all police ranks that were organized to review projects and to ensure their analysis addresses all relevant issues. POP aims to help the Police Department capitalize on information from a broad range of service disciplines, agencies, and resources, thereby generating multidisciplinary solutions. Solutions may involve social services, mental health, code enforcement, building and grounds maintenance, public works, and court service agencies.

The resolution may turn out to be totally unrelated to law enforcement, yet it may contribute significantly to reducing the crime problem. Like the cavalry coming to the aid of an army under siege, the POP system expands the possible solutions to crime problems. Solutions cannot be found solely within the parameters of police patrols, investigations, and stakeouts. Under POP, the police become generalist problem solvers. Police have long known that they did not hold all

the solutions to crime. The complexity of the drug scourge and its interrelationship with other serious crimes have highlighted the need for interdisciplinary approaches to solving crime. POP provides a mechanism for enlisting the assistance of other disciplines and specialists.

POP Projects

The investigation of a street drug market was one of our Police Department's first problem-oriented policing projects. The 32nd Street and Chestnut Avenue area was a notorious open-air drug market. As characteristic of many urban communities, drug customers cruised the neighborhood to buy drugs from waiting street dealers.

A district supervisor was assigned the responsibility of studying the problem. He identified the known dealers in the area, investigated their arrest histories, and found many had long criminal records. Newport News police collaborated with police from the neighboring city of Hampton, as well as the State Police, and concluded that wholesale drug dealers furnished drugs for street dealers to sell. These wholesale drug dealers used large numbers of street dealers. To make an impact on the drug market, the police decided it was necessary to develop cases on the entire group of street drug dealers. Arresting only a few would result in their place being taken by street dealers working for competing wholesale dealers.

Police identified informants and infiltrated the drug network with undercover officers borrowed from other jurisdictions. They also videotaped street drug deals from an apartment donated by a neighborhood landlord. After six months of carefully monitored drug buys, two dozen police officers swept into the area one December evening and made 44 arrests. All of the arrested dealers were convicted and given 5- to 14-year sentences. Open air drug dealing disappeared and calls for service from the area decreased significantly. A storefront police station was later established, and the area permanently lost its notoriety as a drug market.

The police also used the POP model to discourage use and sale of drugs in public and government subsidized housing complexes. Drugs were sold from apartments in a densely developed public housing complex and from nearby street corners. Apartment residents reported unusually heavy traffic to some of the apartments, and groups of young men congregated on the street corners. Individuals frequently left the groups to approach cars, hand packages to drivers, and take money in return. People would greet each other on foot, talk, and during a handshake,

exchange money and drugs. Drug dealer look-outs watched for police foot patrols and squad cars. Once the police were spotted, the drug dealers would flee into apartments to escape.

Clean-Up: A Cooperative Effort

A police officer assigned to the district adopted this problem as a POP project. He addressed the problem with a program that involved the apartment management division of the Newport News Redevelopment and Housing Authority, the City Codes Compliance Department, and the Public Works Department. A cooperative effort between police and apartment management resulted in new and improved outdoor lighting, no-trespassing signs, and fencing. Management also agreed to evict tenants convicted of violating drug laws.

Drugs tend to be sold in areas that look neglected. Improving its appearance makes it look less hospitable and inviting for drug dealing. The officer enlisted the assistance of the Codes Compliance Department to require an auto repair garage to remove inoperable cars from the city's right-of-way. The Public Works Department cleaned trash and debris from Jefferson Avenue.

The impact of the POP project eliminated the visible symptoms of drug trafficking. Reports of around-the-clock traffic to apartments stopped, drug dealers ceased seeking refuge in the complex from police, and calls for service to the complex generally declined.

Two members of the vice squad organized a project to discourage the sale and possession of drugs in the 55 public or subsidized housing complexes throughout the entire city. These complexes were the sources for numerous arrests and complaints about drug sales. Tenants were found frequently selling or permitting drugs to be sold from their apartments.

Police again obtained agreement from the Newport News Redevelopment and Housing Authority to evict tenants convicted of possessing or selling drugs in their apartments. POP project members convened a meeting for the managers of these complexes to define the problem and to review the regulations against use of drugs in the apartments, as well as to review police enforcement procedures and the housing authority's procedures for evicting tenants violating the law. Since the program began, two public housing tenants and 25 guests or tenants of Section 8 housing have been convicted of drug sales. The two public housing residents were evicted and the status of the Section 8 residents is pending. The POP project officers are continuing to monitor the disposition of

the cases and drug arrests in public housing and Section 8 units to assess the effectiveness of their project.

"Drive Through" Drug Deals

A patrol officer recently took on "drive through" drug deals as a POP project. Street-level drug dealers depend on customers driving to them to make their purchases. The officer concluded that drug dealing would be less attractive if its profitability was taken away. Thus, discouraging drug customers from driving automobiles to make their purchases would decrease the drug dealers' market. The officer developed a program to identify vehicles that frequent high drug areas that follows a procedure approved by the prosecutor and is accepted by the courts. All patrol officers were to use the procedure to increase arrests and discourage "drive through" drug deals.

Following the training of uniformed officers, the program was implemented. Police made 30 traffic stops resulting in 18 arrests for possession of drugs. All of the individuals were convicted in the courts.

Success Depends on Support

The use and success of problem-oriented policing depend heavily on the support of the Police Department's middle management and the initiative of patrol officers. The process does not require specially deployed units, and it is not dependent on top management to identify appropriate subjects. The motivation of individual police officers generally determines whether a POP project is initiated. Some police officers are more motivated than others to identify opportunities to use the problem-solving model. Similarly, some first-line supervisors are more inclined to encourage their employees to identify projects for POP. As a result, more projects come from the employees of these supervisors than others.

POP is not intended to reduce the police officers' time to perform their normal duties. Almost all assignments offer police officers some unproductive time during their shift. Officers generally use this time for their POP projects. Occasionally, POP officers are permitted to use their regular work hours to gather information during the analysis phase of a project. It is also important to compare the value of the time used for routine tasks with the value of time used for problem solving. Time spent solving problems may be more valuable than time spent sitting at a stop sign writing tickets. Often the police officers who are the most productive and conscientious in performing their normal duties

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The typical POP project takes three to four months to complete. This length of time may

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seem to be considerable, however, if the city has been living with the problem for years, that time requirement is negligible for the thoughtful solution or mitigation of the problem.

In Newport News, problem-oriented policing facilitates the Police Department's observance and analysis of the dynamics of street-level drug dealing. The model helps police consider appropriate measures, that are needed to arrest and discourage drug dealers. It encourages the police to seek and utilize

other private and public community resources as a part of their solutions to clear the streets of illicit drugs. The process emphasizes cooperation with other law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, and the court. It fosters the nontraditional use of other city departments and private citizens to correct conditions that contribute to the drug problem.

Solutions to Problems

By motivating police to give attention to the causes of crime and to incorporate other community resources into their strategies, POP enables police to do more than respond to incidents and to calls for service. In drug enforcement, POP helps the police be analytical in their approach to fighting violations of drug laws. "The main benefit of problem-oriented policing is that it causes us to think rather than just doing what we have always done," said a Newport News police lieutenant, who serves on the department's Problem Analysis Committee. "Problem-oriented policing causes us to think about solutions," she said. **PM**