# e·cop

## Using the Web to Enhance Community Oriented Policing

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COPS
Community Oriented Policing Services
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## Acknowledgments

U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Community Oriented Policing Services

Office of the Director
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**COPS**

Dear colleagues,

During our 2012 COPS Conference, we heard from many police practitioners using social media, online crime reporting, and other technologies leveraging the power of the Internet to accomplish a variety of objectives that supported a community policing philosophy. Sessions such as "Making the Most of New Technology" and "Budget-Conscious Alternatives to Police Service Delivery" highlighted the many ways the police are using technology to do more with less, efficiently and effectively—with no degradation of service to citizens and, in many cases, an improvement to service delivery. Since the conference, we've posted a podcast exploring the use of social media in law enforcement on the COPS Office web page, "The Beat," and published a series of Issue Briefs, including "Using Social Media to Market and Promote Public Safety Projects."

*E-COP: Using the Web to Enhance Community Oriented Policing* adds to the growing COPS Office library on electronic methods being used by police to solve crimes, engage their citizens in problem-solving efforts, and serve as a conduit of community partnership building, moving us evermore toward a collaborative era in policing. Chapters like "Providing Online Services" may give you new ideas on ways to use the Internet as a force-multiplier in policing service delivery. Furthermore, hyperlinks abound to increase this publication's usability.

In the way that citizens learn about their government and the police rely more and more on Internet-accessed information, it is not surprising that the Internet has increasingly become the means, and for many is the norm, by which they seek and expect to receive government and police services. This publication aims to describe the ways in which e-policing can support and enhance the philosophy and strategy of community oriented policing. We hope you will find it helpful in building and enhancing your agency's community policing strategy.

Sincerely,

Bernard K. Melekian, Director

Office of Community Oriented Policing Services

# Preface

The aim of this non-technical publication is to describe and illustrate the many ways that law enforcement agencies are using the Internet, websites, and other digital techniques to enhance their community policing efforts. A lot of examples are provided, but a lot of technical information is not. This publication will show examples that a police department may want to implement; however, readers will have to look elsewhere for the how-to part. Most agencies or their parent governments have this technical capability, so the bigger challenge, which this publication is meant to help address, is imagining what could be done.



While *E-COP* focuses heavily on police Internet and web applications, the line between these and other digital applications can be rather blurry, as smartphones and tablet devices illustrate. Thus, this publication highlights digital technologies beyond computers and websites that have the potential to enhance community policing. Mobile handheld computing, including smartphones, is an aspect of modern technology that is currently experiencing particularly rapid development and one that seems likely to have more and more implications for policing in the near future.

This intentionally brief publication does not provide an in-depth discussion about community policing because that can easily be located elsewhere.[1] Nor does it provide 10 or 20 examples of each facet of e-policing. Rather, just a few interesting examples of each facet are presented. Again, the primary aim is to illustrate ways in which e-policing can support and enhance community policing, not to canvass every possible combination and permutation.

An important caveat is necessary: police agencies inevitably revise their homepages, web addresses change, and new digital innovations emerge. However, every effort has been made to ensure that the information and links in *E-COP* are up-to-date as of the moment of publication.

Also, this publication highlights a lot of examples of law enforcement agencies using the web to enhance their community policing efforts. However, considering that most of America's 18,000 law enforcement agencies now seem to have websites, perusing them all systematically and thoroughly is nearly impossible, not to mention assessing them for quality, innovativeness, or effectiveness. In the end, there may be websites and digital applications superior to the ones presented here, but the ones included in this publication are impressive and should provide helpful examples for many agencies to follow.

Furthermore, with funding from the COPS Office, project staff reviewed literature that addresses this subject matter, contacted a variety of experts, systematically examined websites of the largest police agencies in the country, followed up on leads and suggestions about innovative practices, and continuously monitored news items about police use of digital technologies.

A formal presentation made in 2008 at a national conference sponsored by the National Institute of Justice in Arlington, Virginia, produced additional observations and suggestions. Also, a focus group, held at Eastern Kentucky University with representatives from five law enforcement agencies, discussed issues and challenges associated with police use of the Internet to enhance community policing.[2]

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1.  Two excellent sources are the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services' publications library, http://ric-zai-inc.com/Publications/cops-p173-pub.pdf, and the Center for Problem-Oriented Policing, www.popcenter.org.

2.  Participants of the focus group, convened by Gary Cordner and Elizabeth Perkins, represented the Henrico County (Virginia) Police Department, Hurst (Texas) Police Department, Indianapolis (Indiana) Police Department, Lexington (Kentucky) Division of Police, and Oakland (California) Police Department.

# Introduction

The pace with which electronic and digital technology have permeated modern policing has been remarkable. Some of this new digital technology has miniaturized what law enforcement agencies already could do, as in the case of police radios, or has sped up what they do, thanks to computers. More significant are those technologies that have allowed and encouraged police departments to revise their organizational strategies, policies, and routines.

For example, many police agencies originally took crime reports only in person, face to face. Then along came telephone reporting, and now a lot of agencies allow members of the public to file reports online. Many agencies also allow individuals to complete and submit job applications online as opposed to requiring them to visit headquarters in order to apply for a job with a department.

Furthermore, many police agencies used to refuse disseminating detailed crime information to the public. Often they would charge a fee to produce crime analysis reports for realty companies, lawyers, and others. Today, many agencies provide detailed crime maps online, free to anyone and everyone. Similarly, a lot of large law enforcement agencies used to centralize and control the public's access to their organizations: e.g., all calls had to come through one telephone number at headquarters. Now, many agencies encourage residents to contact "their" officers directly by e-mail or cell phone.

In fact, some police agencies that have embraced the potential of the Internet see their websites as a key feature of their policing strategy. For example, the Los Angeles Police Department[1] offers "e-policing,"[2] which it describes as "our way of bringing community policing to the Internet."

Given the importance of technology, this publication focuses primarily on digital and web-based e-policing techniques that support electronic community oriented policing (e-cop). The fundamental components of community policing include partnerships, problem solving, and organizational transformation.[3] Other associated elements include citizen[4] input, personal service, broad function, geographic focus, prevention emphasis, and positive interaction.[5] The threads that connect these components and elements are collaboration and engagement: i.e., police working together with the community, other government agencies, and stakeholders to address crime and disorder problems and provide better quality services to the public.

In the modern world, "working together" and "collaborating" often occur in cyberspace. The police department that wants to meet its constituents has, as one option, doing so online. It is ironic but true that the impersonal, sometimes anonymous world wide web makes it easier for a law enforcement agency to solicit public input, engage in positive interactions, and deliver personal services right in its own backyard. As such, calling the Internet the backbone of modern community policing is only a slight exaggeration.

New digital and electronic technologies have dramatically affected government, leading to the creation of the *Journal of E-Government*[6] and the White House's Office of E-Government & Information Technology.[7] In fact, the non-profit Center for Democracy & Technology[8] describes the potential of e-government as follows:

> New technologies in general and the Internet in particular can be used to enhance the way we are governed and the way in which we interact with government. It has been argued that the Internet will be able to reinvigorate the stagnating institutions of our democracy by ushering in a new era of citizen involvement, government transparency, and administrative efficiency.[9]

This description of e-government reflects a widespread movement toward community governance in general.[10] Most important, e-government is not just about using the Internet to provide services more efficiently and economically, but also about engaging people with their government and police in collaborative problem solving.

In the same way that many people use the Internet for banking, shopping, and socializing, the primary vantage point by which people learn about their government and police is the Internet. For many, the Internet is also the means by which they seek, and expect to receive, government and police services. A 2010 Pew report indicated that 82% of Internet users had either looked for information or completed a transaction on a government website during the preceding year.[11] So far, the public has expressed generally favorable opinions about e-government services, but it may be challenging to meet ever-increasing expectations.[12]

E-government fits well with community governance in the same way that e-policing supports community policing. However, while this publication aims to describe the ways in which e-policing can support and enhance the philosophy and strategy of community policing, these applications should be understood in the broader context of overall police effectiveness. A free and open society wants police agencies to accomplish several important ends, including reducing serious crime, holding offenders accountable, making public spaces safe and orderly, making people feel safe, satisfying the public and protecting the legitimacy of the police institution, using force and authority fairly, and using financial resources efficiently. These multiple ends constitute a complicated and multidimensional "bottom line" for judging police effectiveness.[13]

E-policing has the potential to contribute significantly to the accomplishment of several of these important objectives. For example, electronically enhanced information sharing between the police and community might reduce crime by improving crime prevention behaviors and supporting collaborative problem solving. Websites and social networking might be used to solicit information from the community about specific crimes, allowing police to solve more crimes more quickly. Social networking might help police identify unsafe conditions more quickly and help notify the public about problems and crises more effectively. Electronic media might be useful for educating the community about crime and reassuring people that their neighborhoods are safer than they realize.[14] Providing various police services electronically might increase client satisfaction and might prove to be the most efficient way to deliver certain services, saving financial resources. None of these outcomes are guaranteed, of course, but strategic utilization of e-policing will likely contribute to increased police effectiveness in several ways.

1. See "Official website of the Los Angeles Police Department," City of Los Angeles, www.lapdonline.org.

2. See "E-Policing," City of Los Angeles, www.lapdonline.org/e_policing.

3. COPS Office, *Community Policing Defined* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2012), http://ric-zai-inc.com/Publications/cops-p157-pub.pdf.

4. In this publication, the term "citizen" is not meant to be restrictive. It is used interchangeably with "resident" and "member of the public."

5. Cordner, G., "Community Policing: Elements and Effects," *Police Forum 5 (1995): 1–8, reprinted in Critical Issues in Policing: Contemporary Readings*, 6th ed., eds. R.G. Dunham and G.P. Alpert (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2010, 432–449). See also Cordner, G., "Community Policing: Principles and Elements" (Richmond, KY: Eastern Kentucky University, 1996), www.ncdsv.org/images/CommunityPolicingPrinciplesElements.pdf.

6. See "Journal of E-Government," Civil Resource Group, www.egovjournal.com.

7. See "Office of E-Government & Information Technology," White House, www.whitehouse.gov/omb/e-gov/.

8. See "Center for Democracy & Technology," https://www.cdt.org/.

9. "Statement of CDT on E-Government," Center for Democracy & Technology, www.cdt.org/testimony/statement-cdt-e-government.

10. Scheider, M., "From Community Policing to Community Governance," *Community Policing Dispatch* 1 (May 2008), www.cops.usdoj.gov/html/dispatch/may_2008/nugget.htm.

11. Smith, A., "Government Online" (Washington, D.C.: Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2010), http://pewInternet.org/Reports/2010/Government-Online.aspx.

12. See Hicks, R., "Citizen Satisfaction with E-Government Falls in the U.S.," *FutureGov*, April 29, 2009, www.futuregov.net/articles/2009/apr/29/citizen-satisfaction-e-government-us-falls/.

13. Moore, M., and A. Braga, *The "Bottom Line" of Policing: What Citizens Should Value (and Measure) in Police Performance* (Washington, D.C.: Police Executive Research Forum, 2003), www.policeforum.org/library/police-evaluation/BottomLineofPolicing.pdf.

14. Cordner, G., *Reducing Fear of Crime: Strategies for Police* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2010), http://ric-zai-inc.com/Publications/cops-p173-pub.pdf.

# Providing Information to the Community

Law enforcement agencies have a well-established need to inform the public about a variety of matters, such as wanted persons, crime prevention tips, traffic conditions, and new initiatives. In the past, agencies typically relied on printed brochures, newsletters, press releases, and community meetings to carry out their public information function. Often, police had to depend on print, radio, and television media to help publicize and disseminate information.[1]

While these techniques are still used, nowadays police departments have other methods of providing information to the public that can be quicker, cheaper, and more effective.[2] As *Strategic Communication Practices: A Toolkit for Police Executives* expresses:

> Dramatic changes in where and when people get news and information have important ramifications for the communications functions of any police agency…. What these changes offer police departments is the opportunity to exert more control over their own stories, engage citizens in preventing crime, educate people about public safety issues, and dispel some myths about police work.[3]

Other aspects of providing information to the community are related to democracy and transparency. In a free society, people have a right to know what their government is doing, and public officials, including police executives, have an obligation to operate their agencies as openly as possible. When government agencies are open and transparent, citizens are better able to hold them accountable, and people are more likely to develop trust and confidence in their government.

## Alerts and bulletins

As recently as the 1960s, in some cities when police wanted to transmit an important alert or bulletin to the public, they could push a button at headquarters and interrupt commercial radio broadcasts in order to tell the radio-listening audience to "be on the lookout."[4] This capability largely vanished as the number of radio stations proliferated, as television became a bigger focus of the public's attention, and as concerns grew over the potential impact on commercial programming and advertising.

Still, radio and television stations continued to make occasional emergency announcements upon police request and have often played significant public information roles during disasters. Modern variants are the Amber Alerts for missing/abducted children and Silver Alerts for missing senior citizens or Alzheimer patients. These messages are often carried over the radio and on television as well as displayed on electronic roadside message boards.

In contrast to the 1960s, almost everyone today is either sitting in front of a computer or has a handheld digital device (e.g., smartphones and tablets) with them while they are out and about. Moreover, many people seem to focus their attention almost fanatically on these digital gadgets, while television and radio have become more like background noise. Consequently, law enforcement agencies have developed methods for sending alerts and bulletins directly to peoples' computers, cell phones, and other devices.[5] This has become an efficient and effective method for quickly disseminating critical information to the public.

How does this work? Police agencies typically use their websites to invite people to sign up to receive alerts. For example, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement[6] (FDLE) has prominent sign-ups on its homepage for Amber Alerts, sex offender alerts, and BusinesSafe[7]—an alert program specifically for businesses. The Amber Alerts can be received as e-mails and free text messages. Business alerts are issued by Regional Domestic Security Task Forces and deliver information by e-mail or text message to businesses about "breaking news, possible threats, suspicious activity, and specific preparedness and prevention techniques."[8] Similarly, sex offender alerts are delivered by e-mail whenever a registered sex offender moves near an address specified by the alert registrant.[9]

Likewise, the Boise (Idaho) Police Department[10] offers a multi-purpose e-mail alert service.[11] Anyone can sign up for citywide bulletins, some of which report police activities that have already occurred (e.g., "Officers Bust Neighborhood Drug House") while others solicit the public's help (e.g., "Boise Police Search for Robbery Suspects").

In San Antonio, Texas,[12] businesses can sign up with the police department's Businesses Against Theft NETwork[13] to receive e-mail alerts about business crimes occurring citywide or just in their section of the city. The Kankakee County (Illinois) Sheriff's Office[14] provides text message alerts related to road closings, severe weather, and other emergencies.[15] And in Minneapolis, Minnesota,[16] residents can sign up to receive crime bulletins and other e-mail alerts specific to their neighborhood, sector, or precinct by visiting the "MPD E-mail Alert Sign Up"[17] web page. The sign-up system utilizes a map of the city so residents can simply click on their neighborhood.

One of the most extensive alert systems is offered in Washington, D.C., by the city's Emergency Management Agency via a link from the Metropolitan Police Department's[18] homepage. The system, called Alert DC,[19] distributes all types of alerts—from homeland security threats to crime and traffic closures—to a variety of devices including computers and mobile phones.

Due to public interest in receiving crime alerts, several companies have begun offering these services on a commercial basis.[20] In some cases, the police department pays a fee to a company to provide the service in its jurisdiction. In other cases, a company charges individuals a small subscription fee, making the service free to the law enforcement agency. Yet another business model is relying on advertising to generate revenue, with no fees to either the agency or individual subscribers. The advantage of all of these models is that a police department needs to provide the alert messages only—the company provides the software, infrastructure, and support needed to sign up users and disseminate the messages.

Some police agencies have begun utilizing social networking sites and services as vehicles for disseminating alerts about breaking news such as bomb threats or serious crimes.[21] The Boston Police Department,[22] for example, uses Twitter[23] to disseminate information to members of the public, including people gathered at mass events such as parades, festivals, and demonstrations.[24] Twitter messages are brief (140 characters) but have the advantage of being disseminated as quickly as text messages to everyone signed up as a "follower" of the sender. As of January 2013, the Boston Police Department had more than 49,000 followers.[25]

In a similar vein, Victoria, Australia, is developing plans to provide bushfire alerts via Twitter and Facebook in an effort to prevent the devastation that resulted from the fires that killed 173 people in early 2009.[26] And the New York City Office of Emergency Management[27] is using Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to inform the public about emergency preparedness as well as specific incidents occurring in the city.[28]

The cost and effectiveness of modern alert systems are still being determined. During a 2008 tornado alert in Larimer, Colorado, about 100,000 residents never received mobile phone or e-mail alerts that were supposed to be delivered (fortunately the tornado did not materialize).[29] Whether this failure was due to hardware, software, or operator error was not immediately clear. Larimer's wireless service contract for unlimited messages is reported to be $95,000 per year; usage fees in larger jurisdictions are likely to be even higher. FEMA and other federal agencies are currently studying this situation and have developed a new national alert system, IPAWS[30] (Integrated Public Alert and Warning System), that integrates various public and commercial telephones, the Internet, and other communication networks.

A slightly older technology that has a similar purpose to these e-mail and text messaging alert systems (and can be quite costly) is called Reverse 911. This system sends automated voice messages from the police department to users' telephones. Residents can sign up to receive emergency notification calls about incidents occurring in proximity to their home or business addresses. In disaster situations, Reverse 911 can also be used to call all numbers within chosen telephone exchanges or other selected geographic areas. This kind of system was credited with saving many lives during the 2007 wildfires in and around San Diego County, California.[31]

Proactive alert broadcasts, as described above, that "push" information to people's computers, telephones, and other handheld devices seem most likely to serve the purpose of notifying residents (and even visitors) quickly about a serious or critical situation. In addition, alerts and bulletins can be posted on a department's website. While this more passive method does not push the information out to people, it is another way of informing the public. This approach enables extensive information to be provided, including additional text and pictures. Also, visitors to the website can search through current and past bulletins if they are looking for specific information. Two agencies with extensive online alerts are the Hernando County (Florida) Sheriff's Office[32] and the Pennington County (South Dakota) Sheriff's Office[33] with their respective "Community Alert Bulletins"[34] and "Felony Alerts"[34] web pages.

### Neighborhood information

In the context of community policing, it is particularly important to convey relevant information that is geographically focused: e.g., information tailored to particular neighborhoods. As noted above, some alert systems have that capacity—people signing up for the alerts can enter their addresses or neighborhoods and subsequently get alerts that are most pertinent to them. This feature of information dissemination pertains to more than just alerts, though. More generally, crime news, crime prevention tips, and other information from the police department should ideally be tailored to the neighborhoods where people live and work: i.e., to the communities with which people identify.

The Los Angeles Police Department's **e-policing web page**[36] provides one example of targeting information to the public. Residents are invited to sign up by providing their street and e-mail addresses. Subsequently, they receive e-mails, newsletters, and other information from the senior lead officers (SLOs) and area captains responsible for their neighborhoods. The web page indicates that "each SLO is responsible for a small portion of the community known as a Basic Car Area and will address local issues to help keep you safe and informed." Also, on the LAPD's "**Crime Mapping and COMPSTAT**"[37] web page, residents can get detailed Compstat-style crime and arrest data by patrol area.

The **Madison (Wisconsin) Police Department**[38] produces a separate **newsletter**[39] for each of its five districts. Residents can access these newsletters either by visiting the department's "**Madison Police Districts**"[40] web page and clicking on the district of their choice, or they can sign up to receive them by e-mail. In addition, each district's web page provides contact information for the district, identifies the district captain with a picture, and identifies the district's community policing team, neighborhood officers, and school resource officers. Pictures of the district officers are provided along with maps indicating their specific assignments.[41]

An important part of community policing is helping neighborhood residents identify "their" police officer. To accomplish this, officers may patrol on foot, stop and talk with residents, attend community meetings, and hand out business cards. Police agency websites can also help facilitate greater familiarity between officers and the public. In Fort Thomas, Kentucky, the police department's "**Neighborhood Focus Program**"[42] web page lists the city's 18 zones along with a map. When residents click on their zone, they see a picture of the officer specifically responsible for their neighborhood, a short bio of the officer, and the officer's e-mail address and direct telephone number. Some of the officers have also added blogs and surveys to their zone web pages.

The **Davis (California) Police Department**[43] has a "**Contact Your Beat Officer**"[44] web page. When residents click on a beat map or enter their street address, they are given the names of the officers who work each of the city's four beats. Another click provides contact information for any particular beat officer. The officers' shift schedules are also provided to help residents determine when "their officer" will be on-duty.

The **Chicago Police Department's**[45] **CLEARpath**[46] system provides a variety of information to neighborhood residents at the district level.[47] Residents can view pictures and details about their district's most wanted fugitives, see a calendar of events, and read about their district's success stories, crime alerts, news, and services. They can also see charts that identify the number and types of reported community concerns for the month (e.g., gangs, narcotics, and troubled buildings) and the overall disposition of those reports.

In regard to delivering neighborhood-related police and crime information to the public, the next frontier is mobile. A new app developed by the Surrey Police in the United Kingdom is one of the first to offer this kind of mobile functionality and seems likely to be widely replicated:

> This new app not only gives residents in Surrey the ability to view what crimes are happening on their streets in a convenient format, but crucially provides them with live updates on where and how their local neighbourhood police teams are taking action to tackle issues.[48]

## Crime maps

Crime maps have become one of the fastest growing and most popular methods for informing people about problems occurring in their neighborhoods.[49] With Chicago's CLEARMAP[50] system, residents can select a district, zoom in and out of the map and select time periods of interest. They can switch between a drawn street map view and an aerial view. They can also use their mouse to highlight any event on the map to get details about the crime (e.g., location, date, time, crime type, and whether an arrest was made). Incident location is provided only to the block level, and time is rounded to the nearest half hour as a way to give victims some degree of privacy. Also, crimes are not posted until one week after being reported to give investigators time to make sure the event is correctly classified and that other information is accurate.

The Seattle (Washington) Police Department[51] offers a different type of neighborhood crime map. Called a density map,[52] it shows all the police beats in the city shaded from light to dark according to the number of incidents during the past year. High-volume crimes are shaded based on the number of crimes per square mile, whereas low-volume crimes (e.g., homicides and rapes) are shaded based on the number per beat. Website visitors can view the total major crimes, total violent crimes, total property crimes, or individual crime categories such as burglary or vehicle theft. This type of map allows residents to see which parts of the city have lower or higher reported crime rates, but it does not map that information along specific neighborhood boundaries or map individual incidents (although Seattle offers that type of map, too).

The commercialization of crime mapping services has been an important development, as several companies now provide online crime maps for local jurisdictions.[53] Typically, these companies charge a police department a monthly or annual fee. For example, one company charges agencies $49 to $199 per month depending on the jurisdictions' population. In return, these companies take an agency's raw data on crimes and/or calls for service to produce online maps that are accessible to the public, for free, via a link on the police department's website. The development of this business line demonstrates the high level of public interest in this kind of information.

These commercial crime mapping services are particularly helpful to small law enforcement agencies that might not otherwise have the capacity to do crime mapping or put it on their website for the community's benefit. The Urbandale (Iowa) Police Department[54] pays $1,200 per year for this service, which is about 10% of the department's estimated cost to develop and maintain the mapping application itself.[55]

In Maryland, the Governor's Office on Crime Control and Prevention[56] has provided state funding to encourage local agencies to work with CrimeReports.com,[57] a private firm that hosts multiple agencies' crime maps,[58] with the goal of achieving full law enforcement participation in Maryland.[59] One example is the town of Denton with a population of about 3,000 and 10 sworn officers.[60] When users visit the firm's website, data on these crime maps can be sorted by crime type and date range and are as up-to-date as permitted by the police department. Users can also zoom in and out of the maps and can click on incident icons to view a specific incident's details such as date, time, and location.

Another law enforcement agency that utilizes a commercial service is the
Lincoln (Nebraska) Police Department.[61] From the commercial website
CrimeMapping.com,[62] users can select participating agencies, including
Lincoln,[63] or users can link to CrimeMapping.com from the police department's
"Police Activity"[64] web page. Options that users can select include crime types,
date ranges, a variety of locations (e.g., around a street, near a landmark, or
centered on an address), and several map backgrounds (e.g., street map, satellite
view, and labeled satellite view). Clicking on any of the incident icons reveals a
brief description of the incident, including date, time, location, and case number.

Many law enforcement agencies have developed sophisticated crime mapping
capabilities for the benefit of their commanders, detectives, and patrol officers.
Clearly, residents also have considerable interest in this kind of information. One
of the greatest challenges is determining how best to present these crime maps to
the public.

Some online mapping applications are quite complicated, which may deter
community residents from taking advantage of them. On the other hand, if the
presentation is too basic or inflexible, or if the data are too old, users are not
likely to be satisfied with the information they are able to obtain.[65] Striking the
right balance is likely to be an ongoing challenge for police departments.

Online mapping has become so accessible that individuals and community
groups have the capacity to develop them, too. One innovative example is
"Stumble Safely,"[66] a website featuring an online map of Northwest Washington,
D.C., that provides information about assaults, robberies, and other crimes
occurring in the vicinity of popular bars and nightspots. Crime information is
obtained from police reports and other sources such as Twitter messages. The
intent of the site is to help people avoid problem locations when they are out
on the town. Interestingly, the site was developed as part of a D.C. government
competition to see how official data might be used if made more readily available
to the general public.[67]

## Crime prevention and safety information
Many law enforcement agencies provide crime prevention and safety information
on their websites. Before the proliferation of police department websites, this
kind of information was often available only in printed brochures. Putting
the information online has several advantages, including quicker and more
convenient access for the public, an easier way to update and revise information
without having to reprint brochures, and reduced printing costs. Also, online
information can have embedded links, so residents can easily jump from one
document to another depending upon their needs and interests.

For example, the Arlington (Texas) Police Department's[68] "Crime Prevention"[69]
web page has numerous links and public service announcement videos and
several items in Spanish. The Arapahoe County (Colorado) Sheriff's Office[70]
offers 20 current crime prevention and safety tips[71] on its website, including
"Internet Safety for Kids" and "Tornado Safety." The Garden Grove (California)
Police Department's[72] "Personal Security"[73] web page has information about
street precautions, vehicle safety, waiting for a bus, riding on a bus, and office
security. And the Lexington (Kentucky) Division of Police[74] has a web page
about "Community Services"[75] with links for its Citizen Police Academy, seven
safety programs, eleven crime prevention programs, and four programs for kids.

Some law enforcement agencies provide traffic safety information as well as current traffic conditions on their websites. The Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department[76] has a "Current Traffic"[77] web page that updates every 15 minutes with locations of traffic problems and traffic accidents. A similar page[78] for the Metropolitan Nashville Police Department[79] updates every five minutes. A web page[80] provided by Henrico County, Virginia,[81] lists current traffic problems and offers two other features: (1) locations of traffic problems are viewable on a map, and (2) a hyperlink brings visitors to a different website that provides live feeds from traffic cameras.[82] Moreover, this commercial website links to more than 10,000 traffic cameras in about 200 U.S. cities.

## Information about the police department

Law enforcement agency websites typically provide a substantial amount of information about the agency itself, including contact information for various units, annual reports, mission statements, messages from the chief or sheriff, and the history of the agency. Another common feature is a list of an agency's ten most wanted persons. In addition to all these elements, the Arlington (Texas) Police Department also provides a list of fugitives, jail inmates, and current calls for service that is a direct feed[83] from the police department's CAD system. This list of calls is organized by priority and shows the nature of the call, time received, location (at the block level), and status. Visitors can also click on a map icon to see the call location plotted on a city street map.

Issues of openness and transparency come into play when deciding what kinds of information to make available on a law enforcement agency's website. As discussed earlier, some agencies identify individual beat officers with pictures and provide direct contact information—not all agencies are willing to do this. The Arlington (Texas) Police Department provides a link to its current CAD calls directly on its homepage, and the Delaware State Police[84] provides an audio 911 scanner.[85]

Another category of information relates to a police agency's policies and procedures. The Kansas City (Missouri) Police Department[86] provides extensive information about its policies, procedures, special orders, memoranda, and other written guidelines accessible from the "Policies and Procedures" link on its homepage.[87] A few specific policies are omitted for safety reasons, but even then a contact phone number is provided for users who want to pursue information about a policy that is not publicly available. Other agencies that make their policies and procedures available on their websites include the Lawrence (Kansas) Police Department,[88] the Fayetteville (North Carolina) Police Department,[89] and the Peoria (Arizona) Police Department.[90,91]

Quite a number of law enforcement agencies have been involved in federal civil rights cases, consent decrees, and similar outside investigations over the past decade. These are often contentious and controversial, the very definition of bad publicity for the agency. Interestingly, as another testament to openness and transparency, some agencies, such as the Oakland (California) Police Department,[92] have made information related to these matters directly available to the public via their websites.[93]

## Issues and considerations

The guiding principle underlying all of the techniques discussed in this section is that police agencies should share information widely and systematically with the public. Community residents need information during emergencies and to help them assist the police, help prevent crime, and protect their homes, businesses, and neighborhoods.

In addition, citizens in a free society need, and are entitled to, information about what the police are doing to enhance responsiveness and accountability. The Internet and other digital technologies make information dissemination faster and more extensive and make that information readily available whenever members of the public want it.

Around the edges of the guiding principle, however, are some important issues and considerations. These include:

**Privacy:** Police departments routinely collect information that includes people's names, addresses, telephone numbers, driver's license numbers, associates, and alleged misdeeds. Police reports include intimate details about victimization and other personal events, and some police information pertains specifically to juveniles who may be entitled to an extra degree of privacy. Deciding exactly what information to make public and readily available on the police department's website or in alert messages is an important issue with legal, ethical, and practical considerations.

**Safety:** Making certain types of information widely available might endanger the safety of victims, offenders, or police officers. Personal safety is an important value to be weighed against the public's general right to know.

**Operational effectiveness:** Police departments routinely withhold information from the press and the public to avoid compromising ongoing investigations before they are completed. The same principle should apply to information that a law enforcement agency might consider disseminating or publishing electronically. The challenge lies in weighing the benefits of openness against the possible costs to operational effectiveness, while avoiding the temptation to keep more information secret than is necessary.

**Computer security:** New electronic technologies are sometimes not as secure as they should be. Implementing new technology that opens a gateway to computer hackers or others with malicious intent could jeopardize a police agency's databases and information systems. For example, the U.S. Department of Defense announced in August 2009 that it was considering prohibiting official use of Twitter, Facebook, and other social networking technologies for security reasons.[94,95] In 2011, several U.S. law enforcement agencies had their websites hacked by groups protesting the arrests of other Internet hackers; protesters then posted confidential information online, including credit card numbers and investigative evidence. They seemed to target smaller police departments and sheriff's offices whose Internet service providers lacked stringent security measures.[96]

**Cost and staffing:** There are costs attached to any method of information dissemination, including the cost of computer hardware and software, service fees, and staffing. On an ongoing basis, staffing is likely to be the biggest cost—someone has to compose all those alerts, bulletins, newsletters, etc. However, police agencies were issuing press releases and developing brochures even before the Internet and homepages existed. To some extent then, these are not new costs, and electronic dissemination undoubtedly provides savings in printing and mailing. In any cost/benefit analysis, a key consideration is the increased benefit provided by the wider and faster provision of information, and whether that justifies any increased costs.

**Information accuracy:** There is little point in providing information that is not correct; in fact, if the public were to act on wrong information, it might result in negative consequences. When agencies begin to disseminate more information, and do so faster, the possibility of providing inaccurate information increases. In addition, the public's expectations probably rise faster than an agency's ability to meet them. In Los Angeles, for example, the police department was criticized in 2009 because its online crime maps did not correctly locate a substantial number of crimes;[97] it was criticized again when numerous serious crimes were omitted.[98,99]

**Policy:** The issues and considerations enumerated in this list demonstrate that law enforcement agencies need to develop formal policies and procedures to govern the provision of information via their websites, alerts, bulletins, Twitter accounts, Facebook accounts, and other electronic systems. Agencies need to identify the principles that will guide information dissemination, and they need to authorize specific personnel to decide what information to disseminate, actually release the information, carry out the dissemination, and so forth. Most likely, agencies already have such policies and procedures for traditional public information functions, but they probably need to be updated for today's digital environment. The International Association of Chiefs of Police established a Center for Social Media in 2010 to help agencies navigate these tricky new waters.[100]

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# Soliciting Information from the Community

Effective policing depends heavily on information from the public. The police need people to report crimes and suspicious situations so investigations can commence. When people see a crime in progress, quick reporting gives police the chance to interrupt the incident and catch the offender. Information from witnesses is crucial to solving crimes after they occur. Tips from informants and the general public help the police find wanted persons and discover the kinds of crimes that otherwise would not be reported. Traditional crime control efforts can succeed only when people supply the police with information.

Police agencies need other types of information from the public, too. Information about underlying and recurring neighborhood problems helps officers initiate problem-solving activities. Likewise, citizens' fears and concerns can alert the police to the need for reassurance efforts. Also, feedback from the public can help law enforcement agencies adjust their priorities and practices to better satisfy their communities. This can include citizen assessments of how they were treated during specific interactions with the police as well as overall opinions about police service and protection.

Websites and other digital technologies provide many ways for police agencies to solicit information from the public. These methods are generally efficient and inexpensive. They are also convenient for the public—people can use them whenever they choose, from the comfort of their home or out and about the neighborhood, and can use their favorite technology, whether that is a smartphone, tablet, text message, e-mail, blog reply, or other web comment. Additionally, many of these systems provide a degree of confidentiality or even anonymity for those who want to help but also want to limit their actual involvement. These methods offer a great deal of promise if people can be convinced to use them routinely and responsibly.

## Suspicious activity and neighborhood problems

People may wonder why online reporting of crimes and suspicious activity would be useful when 911 is already in place. Presumably, most people will continue to rely primarily on calls to 911 to report emergencies and calls to 311 or other non-emergency numbers to report lesser problems. However, there are exceptions:

- Some people have trouble speaking and can communicate more effectively in text format.
- In some situations, speaking aloud into a telephone might be dangerous or alert an offender, whereas texting would not.
- During large-scale emergencies, voice telephone service may be interrupted or overwhelmed, but e-mails, texts, and tweets may still get through.
- Many situations are so minor that no immediate action is required, and a person might simply find reporting such a situation by e-mail or text more convenient.
- Some people who do not want to give their names may feel that a text, e-mail, or website comment is more anonymous than a telephone call.

Some examples of police agencies that solicit initial notification of crimes, complaints, and suspicious activity via the web or other digital systems includes the Reno (Nevada) Police Department,[1] which allows its residents to submit graffiti complaints[2] and code violations via online forms. (For information about full-scale online crime reporting, in which a victim or witness provides complete information that results in an official police report, see "Providing Online Services" on page 28.)

Another example is the "Online Service Requests"[3] web page, provided by Portland, Oregon,[4] that presents various links visitors can use to report many types of complaints, including graffiti, neighborhood nuisances, liquor license violations, dangerous buildings, noise, and street light problems. The Collier County (Florida) Sheriff's Office[5] has an online form[6] for reporting any kind of suspicious criminal activity, as well as a specific page[7] for reporting an abandoned house or a "grow house"used for indoor marijuana cultivation. The San Diego Police Department's[8] "Forms"[9] web page provides easy online reporting of inoperable motor vehicles and vehicles parked in the same location for longer than 72 hours, along with a general purpose form for reporting suspicious activity. While all of these types of web pages provide many benefits, they should all include an admonishment that, in an emergency situation, residents should call 911 rather than submit information online.

Many police departments are now setting up their public safety communication systems, such as 911, to be able to receive e-mail and text message notifications about incidents and problems.[10] This can be somewhat challenging for real-time incidents if quick police action is required.[11] When people call 911 with their telephones, the calls are automatically sent to the correct emergency communications center (although this system is still being adjusted for mobile phone calls). With e-mails and texts, however, there is no enhanced 911 technology working in the background to direct the message to the correct destination—rather, the person sending the e-mail or text message usually must specify the receiver's e-mail address or telephone number for the message to be received. If the person sends the message to an incorrect destination or to one that is monitored only Monday through Friday from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm, the value of their information may be negated.

Crime Stoppers,[12] a program started in 1976 with local chapters typically run by non-profit citizen groups, has developed one solution to this situation. In some jurisdictions, including Boston and Los Angeles, residents can send a text message to CRIMES (274637). Inclusion of the word "TIP" in Boston or "LAPD" in Los Angeles at the beginning of the initial text message initiates an anonymous or encrypted text dialogue through which the person can convey his or her information to the police department (however, the person must recall that each text message is limited to 160 characters).[13] Similar systems are offered by some of the same private companies that assist local governments and law enforcement agencies in distributing alerts.[14]

Clearly this is an evolving situation. It seems inevitable that more and more citizens will want to notify police about various situations via e-mail, text messages, or Facebook posts.[15] However, none of these methods are presently as reliable as an old-fashioned telephone call, especially in getting the message to the correct law enforcement agency. Also, two-way closed-loop communication, with the opportunity to ask questions and get answers is usually quicker and often more effective over the telephone.

As with web tips, police agencies will want to emphasize that emergencies should still be reported using 911. At the same time, police communication centers will need to enhance their technology and procedures to receive the e-mails and texts that will undoubtedly increase in volume over time. The Federal Government is currently sponsoring the **Next Generation 911 Initiative**[16] to help public safety communications make the transition to digital and Internet Protocol technology and systems.[17]

An additional interesting application for reporting any and all kinds of non-emergency local problems is the independent website **SeeClickFix.com**.[18] Visitors to this free site can report problems such as streetlight repairs, illegal dumping, and parking enforcement for their specific locations anywhere in the country. These problems and complaints are then posted to a U.S. Google map with zoom capabilities (paid subscribers can access additional features). The most commonly reported complaints seem to be potholes. Other commonly reported complaints that might interest the police more include graffiti, parking problems, traffic light malfunctions, and abandoned cars. The developers of the website explain their objective as follows:

> A few local governments have enough sophistication to run functional websites or 311 hot lines. Most do not have the resources to do much more than brochure-ware. Our site is a place for citizens from anywhere to give their local government a website that tracks local issues. No set-up time. No hiring consultants to study the issue. Just SeeClickFix.[19]

Similarly, on the local level, Boston announced in 2009 that it was developing a smartphone application that would allow residents to send photos of potholes, graffiti, and similar nuisances directly to city hall.[20] The city already offers a 24-hour call-in hotline to report such problems, but it expects younger residents to prefer the smartphone service.

### Help with investigations

Another common feature of law enforcement agency websites is soliciting information related to specific investigations. Websites offer a particular advantage for this because photos, videos, and extensive texts can be posted online for the public to view. In the past, a newspaper might publish one black-and-white photo of a bank robbery, for example, whereas multiple color photos can be provided on websites. Similarly, television stations might agree to show a bank robbery video once or twice during their news programs, but the same video can be made available online for viewing at any time.

The Los Angeles Police Department's website includes dedicated sections such as missing persons, reward bulletins, and art theft accessible from its homepage, along with most wanted offenders and most wanted gang members—all with photos and accompanying information. The **Albuquerque Police Department's**[21] main page previously provided a link to a serial murder cold-case investigation, where photos of identified victims and information about unidentified victims were provided—this page has now been moved to its own separate website, titled "**Help Us Catch A Killer**."[22] The **New York City Police Department**[23] has a web page specifically for **bank robbery suspects**,[24] and the **Georgia Bureau of Investigation**[25] has a page devoted to **unidentified human remains**.[26]

The FBI[27] has partnered with local law enforcement agencies and the banking industry to establish "Bandit Tracker" websites. Each of these sites features photos of unsolved bank robberies along with descriptive suspect information. Online maps are also provided to show where bank robberies occurred in the region. The sites have an Info/Tips tab through which the public can submit information that might be helpful to investigators. Particular suspects are sometimes given nicknames to heighten public interest. For example, the Quick Change Bandit and the Carrot Top Bandit were among the robbers listed on Chicago's "Bandit Tracker" website in August 2011.[28]

Soliciting information online from the public to help with investigations is often done in conjunction with Crime Stoppers, Silent Witness, most wanted lists, and other existing programs. Many law enforcement agency websites have links to Crime Stoppers,[29] which used to rely heavily on "Crimes of the Week" publicized on local television stations. Members of the public could then call in, anonymously, and receive cash rewards if their information led to the police solving the case or locating the wanted person. Crime Stoppers still uses television and radio publicity, as well as flyers and billboards, but now also has a substantial online presence with photos, crime descriptions, and other information. The websites promote the Crime Stoppers' telephone numbers but also offer the option to submit web tips.[30]

The name Silent Witness is used for several different programs around the United States, including online crime and tip reporting at many universities and a national initiative aimed at reducing domestic violence. The Arizona Department of Public Safety's[31] "Silent Witness"[32] web page links directly to the non-profit Phoenix metropolitan area Silent Witness[33] program, which operates more like Crime Stoppers, offering rewards for information that helps solve serious crimes or locate wanted suspects. This website takes advantage of web capabilities by presenting multiple photographs to help publicize unsolved cases.

Many law enforcement agencies post lists of their most wanted offenders on their websites, along with pictures and explanatory information. Often the "most wanted" tabs or icons on police websites are linked to Crime Stoppers to reassure those providing information that they can remain anonymous, if desired. The New York City Police Department uses this method with its "Wanted Gallery"[34] and solicits telephone, text, and web tips. The web tip form is offered in several languages and allows pictures to be attached when tips are submitted.

On the national level, the U.S. Marshals Service[35] has a web page dedicated to soliciting help in locating its top 15 fugitives,[36] and the FBI has separate "Most Wanted"[37] pages for its 10 most wanted fugitives, its most wanted terrorists, kidnappings and missing persons, parental kidnappings, unknown bank robbers, crimes against children, and unsolved homicide, sexual assault, and missing person cases. The FBI has become particularly innovative in using new technology to attract the public's attention and draw people to its web pages where open cases and most wanted offenders are highlighted.[38] The FBI produces attractive widgets and interactive posters that users can add to their websites, desktops, and Facebook and MySpace pages, all of which link back to FBI alerts and bulletins. The FBI also produces podcasts and e-mail alerts and has utilized digital billboards around the country to publicize wanted persons. And in 2011, the FBI produced a smartphone app to assist with identifying and locating missing children.[39]

A different twist has also developed; offenders can use Twitter and other social media to communicate among themselves and with the outside world. This seems to be a common characteristic of flash mobs and appears to have been a major source of coordination among those who rioted in London in the summer of 2011.[40] In response, the London Metropolitan Police used social networks to solicit the public's assistance in identifying photographs of looters and others who committed crimes, as did the Vancouver police in Canada following the Stanley Cup riot in June 2011.[41] In turn, the New York City Police Department also created a new social media unit to scour social networks for information about crime and disorder.[42]

## Complaints and commendations

Other types of input sought from the public include complaints and commendations pertaining to specific agency employees. Some departments provide forms on their websites to submit this kind of information, but the forms must be downloaded, completed, and then mailed in or dropped off. Other agencies enable the public to submit complaints and compliments online. Among those offering this online service are the Seattle (Washington) Police Department and the Tulsa County (Oklahoma) Sheriff's Office[43] with their respective "Online OPA Complaint Form"[44] and "Citizen Comments Form."[45] Other agencies, however, offer even more flexibility. The Keller (Texas) Police Department,[46] for example, encourages people to file commendations or complaints by calling the department, sending an e-mail, or submitting an online form.[47]

## General feedback

Law enforcement agencies may also use their websites to solicit general feedback from the public. This can take the form of a community survey, an issue poll, or simply encouragement to contact them. Some police departments also seek specific feedback from residents who have had recent contact with an officer or other member of the department. These are much like customer satisfaction follow-up requests from hotels, retail stores, and other businesses.

Many law enforcement agencies now offer community surveys on their websites. These surveys typically include a mix of closed-ended and open-ended questions and are usually not lengthy. They give the general public an opportunity to provide their opinions about the police agency, and they provide a way to measure the community's perceptions of crime and safety. A few examples are the Fairfax County (Virginia) Police Department's[48] "Community Satisfaction Survey"[49] and the "Campbell County Police Department Survey"[50] in Kentucky.

These general-purpose community surveys often ask respondents whether they have had recent personal encounters with members of the law enforcement agency. Another type of survey focuses specifically on satisfaction with recent police-citizen contacts. To gain the best advantage from these surveys, departments sometimes provide the web address of the survey on citation and report forms, or e-mail a link to people soon after they have reported a crime, been involved in an accident, or received another form of police service. Examples of citizen contact surveys on agencies' websites include the Bonney Lake (Washington) Police Department's[51] "Citizen's Survey,"[52] the Grapevine (Texas) Police Department's[53] "Online Citizen Survey,"[54] the Illinois State Police's[55] "Citizen Survey,"[56] and the Marshall County (Iowa) Sheriff's Office's[57] "Citizen Service Input."[58]

Sometimes police agencies use their websites to solicit specific or targeted feedback from the public over a limited period of time. The **Howard County (Maryland) Police Department**[59] used laser speed cameras on an experimental basis in school zones (issuing only warnings) and then posted a web survey to get a sense of the public's awareness of the experiment and support for state legislation to authorize the use of cameras for speed enforcement. Likewise, the Seattle (Washington) Police Department offered a survey asking for feedback about its website. The **Portsmouth (Virginia) Police Department**[60] posted a web survey seeking input for its 5-year strategic planning process. The **Chesapeake (Virginia) Sheriff's Office**[61] sought feedback on its use of inmate work crews in the community. And Minneapolis sought public input on desirable qualities for a new police chief. Also, the **Douglas County (Oregon) Sheriff's Office**[62] is using an **online survey**[63] to fine-tune its Neighborhood Watch programs.

## Issues and considerations

Law enforcement agencies want and need information from the public for a lot of reasons. Now that people are so digitally connected by mobile phones, smartphones, and computers, police have the opportunity to obtain information more quickly and efficiently about crimes, suspicious activity, and neighborhood problems. They also have additional means to solicit help from the public in solving crimes and locating wanted persons. Some of the same digital technologies can also be used to seek input and feedback from the police agency's "customers" and from the community in general.

There are, however, definitely some issues and challenges associated with these modern methods of seeking information. These include:

**Integration with 911:** Law enforcement agencies typically instruct the public to not use e-mail or text messages but rather 911 to report emergencies. E-mails and texts work well for submitting tips that police can follow up on later but not as well for reporting serious incidents in progress. Further public education will be required to drive home this lesson. In the meantime, systems are being developed that will enable communication centers to receive e-mails and texts about real-time events, considering they will inevitably be submitted in this way and sometimes can be the only operable means of communication during disasters and other emergencies.

**Information versus noise:** Creating the capacity to receive web and text tips is likely to increase the number of tips that police and Crime Stoppers receive. Many of the tips may be groundless or incorrect, although initial indications show that few bogus tips are being submitted.[64] Because following up on tips takes time and effort, agencies may be challenged by the increased volume they are likely to receive.

**Costs and staffing:** The direct costs associated with setting up online systems to solicit information from the public are generally minimal. Creating and hosting online surveys may entail some costs, but these are usually quite reasonable. More significant costs may be incurred for staffing—employees who update "Most Wanted" web pages, follow up on tips, analyze survey data, etc. Also, some law enforcement agencies receive quite a few messages via their "Contact Us" web page features. Deciding who should receive and follow up on these messages is an important consideration, and the cumulative staff time required for follow-ups and replies may be significant.[65]

**Digital divide:** Not everyone in America is online and digitally connected, although access is growing quickly. About two-thirds of Americans now have high-speed Internet connections at home, up from 55% in 2008.[66] But one in five American adults does not use the Internet, and online access is lower for senior citizens, disabled persons, and lower-income people than for others.[67] As long as this remains the case, law enforcement agencies will need to be careful about relying too heavily on e-policing techniques for both providing information to the public and soliciting information from the public. These techniques may work well for some people but not for others. Because the police have an obligation to serve the entire community, they need to be sensitive to this situation.

**Complaints:** Accepting complaints against officers and other employees online may have the effect of increasing the number of frivolous, spiteful, and even false complaints that are filed. This could increase the workload of complaint investigators and subject officers to unfair scrutiny. The other side of the coin, of course, is that accepting complaints online may empower some people who otherwise would be unwilling to file complaints for fear of intimidation or retaliation. Striking the right balance between encouraging complaints from the public and protecting officers from unfair charges is a difficult challenge. One way to maintain balance is to also solicit commendations and compliments online.

**Skewed feedback:** Online community surveys and citizen contact surveys are inexpensive to administer, and they convey to the public that the police department cares about public opinions and suggestions. One risk, however, is that the feedback may not be representative. In traditional surveys, great care is usually taken to select a random or systematic sample so that, when responses are obtained, there is some confidence that they represent the larger population. This is more difficult to ensure when responses are provided to a survey attached to an agency's website. In the first place, whether the people visiting the website are representative of the entire community is unknown. Second, the representativeness of those who notice the survey and choose to complete it is also unknown. For these reasons, the better systems may be those in which the law enforcement agency sends e-mails or letters to a carefully chosen sample of residents and/or police service recipients, asking them to go to a web address and complete a survey. This provides more confidence that the group being asked to provide feedback is a fair reflection of the entire community. Of course, as with all surveys, another challenge to obtaining representative input is getting a sufficient number of respondents to actually complete the survey.

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# Providing Online Services

An earlier section of this publication describes the many ways in which police agencies are using the Internet and other modern technologies and networks to deliver information to the public (see "Providing Information to the Community" on page 7). Certainly, delivering information, such as alerts and bulletins, is an important component of providing police services, but it is only one component. Beyond their need for information, citizens engage with the police for other reasons, requesting services that traditionally may have required the dispatch of a patrol officer or a trip to the police station. As such, other types of services that used to require face-to-face contact have been streamlined and are now being delivered electronically.

## Filing a report

Perhaps the most commonly available online police service today is the opportunity to file an official report of a crime or other incident. While this might be considered just another aspect of getting information from the public, it is also a direct service because residents often need to file reports for legal or insurance reasons, and in many other situations citizens consider notifying the police their civic responsibility when a crime occurs.

Technologically, administratively, and strategically, online crime reporting would have been unthinkable 30 years ago when the standard police response to any reported crime was to dispatch a patrol officer to the scene to conduct a preliminary investigation and complete a report. Starting in the 1980s, however, many law enforcement agencies began adopting telephone reporting and other differential police response (DPR) alternatives.[1] With these DPR alternatives as a precedent, adding online reporting as one more option was a relatively small step once agencies had fully functional websites.

Needless to say, there are pros and cons associated with taking crime reports over the Internet (or over the phone). Some degree of personal contact between the police and the public is sacrificed, and the chances of introducing inaccurate or even false information into official reports are increased. On the plus side, these forms may be the most convenient option for some citizens, and they undoubtedly provide police agencies labor and cost savings.

To help balance these pros and cons, many agencies give people a choice in how to report crimes, rarely mandating that a crime be reported via the telephone or Internet. Also, agencies normally caution website visitors to call 911 if they are experiencing any kind of emergency, and they typically limit the types of crimes that can be reported online. The Arlington (Texas) Police Department, for example, gives these instructions:

> Please confirm the following to find out if online filing is right for you:
>
> - This is not an emergency?
> - This incident occurred within the city limits of Arlington?
> - There are no known suspects?
> - There is no crime currently in progress?[2]

If these criteria are met, then Arlington residents are invited to file their report online as long as it falls under one of six categories: theft, vehicle burglary, vandalism, identity theft, harassing phone call, and lost property. The Scottsdale (Arizona) Police Department[3] has a similar set of criteria for their online reporting system, which offers five incident categories: thefts under $1,000, stolen bicycles, shoplifting under $250, criminal damage under $2,000, and lost property over $2,500.[4]

## Paying a fee or fine

E-commerce is another common service that is now available through many police agency websites. Shopping and making payments online have become routine for many Americans, and making an online payment is certainly quicker than mailing a check and more convenient than having to drive (or take public transportation) to a police station or other government facility. The value of this service is even greater if the payment has to be made to a neighboring or distant agency, as opposed to one's hometown police department.

The most common e-commerce functionality on police websites seems to be for paying parking tickets. Another common option is online payment for permits that the law enforcement agency issues, such as San Diego's **alarm permits**.[5] Police e-commerce services are often consolidated within a parent government's website. For example, Newport News, Virginia, offers a "**Pay a Parking Ticket**"[6] web page on its site, as does Louisville, Kentucky, with its "**Violation and Ticketing System**"[7] page. And sometimes online payments are made through third-party vendors, as in the case of **automated photo-enforcement speeding citations**[8] in Chevy Chase Village, Maryland.

Police-related e-commerce seems likely to increase in future years for two main reasons. First, e-commerce in general is becoming more common, so anything the public currently pays to the police is liable to migrate to the web. Second, many police agencies are under intense financial pressure, and this pressure is already resulting in the police charging for services that used to be free. As this trend increases, it seems inevitable that online payment for these services will be a common option.

## Registration and permits

Some agencies offer various registration and permitting forms online, with or without associated fees. The police department in the Village of Schaumburg, Illinois, for example, accepts **bicycle registrations online**.[9] And law enforcement agencies enable residents to apply for alarm permits online in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina; Plano, Texas; and Lincoln, California.[10] For the most part, however, online application for parade permits and other kinds of special events does not seem common at this time. Rather, applicants often can download the permit form from the police agency website, but they must submit it in hard-copy format by mail or in person. Residents in Minneapolis, however, can register their **National Night Out**[11] event and apply for street/alley closures online or by telephone only, as applications by mail are no longer accepted.[12]

## Requesting police services

Many police agency websites provide opportunities for residents to request specific police services. While this is not exactly the same as delivering the service itself online, it represents another means by which law enforcement agencies can demonstrate their commitment to customer service and e-government. For example, citizens in **San Diego** can request extra police patrols at specified locations.[13] Residents of Seminole County, Florida, can make an **online request**[14] for a sheriff's office representative to attend their event. One of the most common options is allowing residents to request that the police check on their homes while they are on vacation. Examples of these options being offered on agencies' websites include the **Ocean City (Maryland) Police Department's**[15] "**Residential Security Check: Registration Form**,"[16] the **Fullerton (California) Police Department's**[17] "**Add Vacation Check**,"[18] and the **Canby (Oregon) Police Department's**[19] "**Vacation Check Request**."[20]

### Applying for police employment

Another increasingly common feature of law enforcement agency websites is the opportunity for citizens to apply for employment online. For the agency, several benefits of this system include 24-hour access for potential applicants, elimination of logistical barriers such as travel costs (especially for non-local applicants), and automated screening questions that can help eliminate unqualified applicants. More important, young adults today are inclined to look for information online rather than in newspapers, newsletters, or brochures.

Thus, an agency's website is one of its main recruiting mechanisms in the 21st century and provides an excellent platform for using pictures, videos, and text to get the attention of possible future employees and make a good first impression.[21] Agencies should consider maximizing this recruiting potential by allowing interested persons who have been attracted to the website to apply for employment right there, rather than forcing them to call a phone number or make a trip to a personnel/human resources office to pick up and drop off an application.

The City of Los Angeles accepts online employment applications[22] for law enforcement officers, as does Atlanta, Georgia; Prince George's County, Maryland; and Arvada, Colorado.[23] Of course, some agencies are not currently accepting applications due to the financial crises affecting governments, and, as a result, recruiting and competition for applicants are not quite the high priorities they were just 3 to 5 years ago. Whenever the financial situation eases and police hiring resumes, however, those agencies with online recruiting and application processes are likely to have a distinct advantage over agencies still operating with old-fashioned hiring processes. Police agencies can also take advantage of job sites like DiscoverPolicing.org[24] to post vacancies and review resumes.

### Issues and considerations

So far, use of the web to deliver police services beyond information dissemination has been fairly limited. This is not surprising, as the web and Internet are fundamentally channels of communication and sources of information. Much like the telephone, the web can be used to give someone information, but if that person actually needs direct police assistance, whether to get their neighbors to quiet a loud party or to have a traffic crash investigated, how that police service could literally be delivered electronically is more difficult to imagine.

Core police services related to keeping the peace and enforcing the law traditionally have been, and still are, provided in person, face-to-face. Could this evolve over time? Perhaps. For example, injunctions have been served via Twitter and court orders via Facebook in the United Kingdom, and a civil court summons was served in Australia via Facebook in 2012, all with the court's approval.[25] To the extent that modern life becomes more virtual, policing could also become more virtual. Presumably there are limits to this trend, but to assume that virtual policing is merely fantasy or science fiction would be naïve.

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# Engaging the Community

Because community engagement is one of the principal components of
community policing, law enforcement should consider how websites, the
Internet, and other electronic networks might help an agency engage its
community more effectively. Earlier discussions about providing information to
the community and getting information from the community certainly touched
on engagement, such as using the web to solicit information from the public in
order to solve specific crimes. More generally, though, law enforcement agencies
should consider how electronic media might be used to engage members of the
public in policing, crime prevention, and related activities.

## Conversation

Some law enforcement agencies use their websites to engage the public in
conversation about crime and policing. An example of this at the department
level is "The Director's Desk"[1] in Lincoln, Nebraska, formerly called "The
Chief's Corner" before the author, Thomas Casady, was promoted from police
chief to public safety director in 2011. Since 2007, Casady has authored a blog
that is both amusing and informative. Clearly, one of his main objectives is to
educate his community about crime and policing issues, but the blog format
also encourages readers to post comments and reactions and enables Casady
to respond. The end result is not just a news bulletin or an educational lecture
(although it can be both), but also a real back-and-forth conversation.

Before blogs became such popular Internet communication forums, e-mail lists
and listserves were developed to help connect groups of people online. The
Metropolitan Police Department in Washington, D.C., has used e-mail lists since
2004 for two-way communication with the community. The police department
currently maintains nine e-mail list groups—one in each of the agency's seven
districts, one attached to a district substation, and one to its Special Liaison Unit.
The department explains:

> The purpose of the police-community Yahoo e-mail discussion groups
> is to allow police officials an online venue for collecting and sharing
> information with members of their individual police districts, 7 days a
> week, 24 hours a day.
>
> The discussion groups aid in:
>
> - increasing awareness,
> - reducing crime and the fear of crime, and
> - improving community relations.
>
> The method of communication allows residents and officials to
> communicate back and forth around the clock, which eliminated
> concerns from previous years of not knowing which tour of duty
> members could call their local officials to report concerns. Police officials
> and watch commanders are able to forward alerts for public safety;
> information about community meetings; changes to staff; and details
> about upcoming events. The site is also used to connect other city
> officials with the concerns that can improve the quality of life in local
> neighborhoods.[2]

Similarly, the Durham (North Carolina) Police Department[3] uses a listserve to help promote community engagement in its Project Safe Neighborhoods initiative:

> To aid in information exchange, the Project Safe Neighborhoods group has created this listserve for officers and civilians to discuss violent crime issues and develop solutions. The vision of the Durham Police Department is to connect every community, every block, and every resident (with e-mail) in the City of Durham so that together we may constructively discuss violent crimes and seek solutions.
>
> This listserve should only be used for comments and discussions related to violent crimes, causes, and solutions. While other issues are certainly important, conversation or comments on unrelated issues will make this forum less productive and meaningful to our community.[4]

Blogs, listserves, e-mail lists, discussion boards, chats, and similar venues can give a law enforcement agency the opportunity to converse with many people who otherwise might not come in direct contact with the police. While one-on-one personal contact may still be a more powerful tool, that method only reaches one person at a time. And while a face-to-face community meeting may provide a qualitatively different opportunity to engage in dialogue, not everyone attends community meetings. In today's world, when a lot of human communication occurs electronically, the police would be wise to capitalize on e-media to supplement more traditional forms of police-community interaction.

## Partnerships

In the two previous examples, where the police departments in Washington, D.C., and Durham, North Carolina, took steps beyond engaging the community via discussion groups and listserves, they also demonstrate coming together, strengthening partnerships, and solving problems. Police-sponsored e-mail groups and listserves like these at the community level might contribute to partnerships in several ways, such as helping residents become familiar with each other, helping them recognize what they have in common, and helping formative or established groups communicate and coordinate to plan and carry out community initiatives.

Many police departments use their websites to publicize their partnerships and solicit new ones. Two examples are the Seminole County (Florida) Sheriff's Office's[5] "Community Partnerships"[6] web page and the Snohomish County (Washington) Sheriff's Office's[7] "Our Community"[8] page. Agencies like these are making an important, symbolic statement with their websites—they have various partnerships in the community, and they are open and welcoming law enforcement agencies.

The Wheat Ridge (Colorado) Police Department[9] adds another dimension, identifying several existing community partnerships on its website and providing this statement:

> The Wheat Ridge Police Department is always interested in finding new ways to partner with the community. Programs that will enhance the safety of the community in both traditional and innovative ways are always being sought and encouraged. If you are interested in current programs or have ideas about new programs, please contact Sergeant [name and e-mail link provided], or call him at [phone number provided].[10]

This statement goes beyond just providing a few feel-good generalities. The department identifies the specific individual who should be contacted by anyone interested in new programs and partnerships and provides two ways to contact him. This sends a clear message about the department's desire to collaborate with everyone in the community.

So-called "partnership-working" has been a key feature of community policing in the United Kingdom for several years, and two national-level websites support local community partnerships directly: National Community Safety Network[11] and CRP (Crime Reduction Partnerships) News.[12] The first site serves as a "community of practice" where anyone involved in community safety can share and find information from all around the country. Because there are community safety partnerships at the local level throughout the United Kingdom, this is an important vehicle to help partnerships learn from one another, including best practices, funding sources, and new developments. The CRP News website, which is privately sponsored by the Association of Business Crime Partnerships, provides current events and news information related to crime and partnerships in the United Kingdom.

On both of these websites, visitors can sign up to receive periodic e-newsletters. This is a key feature for successful information sharing and partnership building because e-newsletter subscribers get more than new information delivered to their Inboxes—they also get a periodic reminder (in the form of a newsletter) that additional valuable information and services are available on the website.

Otherwise, partners and community members would have to remember to visit the website on a regular basis to see whether any new information has been added. Counting on this kind of proactive behavior does not always work well because many people are so busy that they forget to visit more than a small handful of favorite websites on a frequent basis. When websites were a new phenomenon, the mantra "if you build it, they will come" may have been true. Today, however, most successful enterprises find they need to use a variety of methods, such as e-newsletters, text messages, and tweets, to draw people back to their websites.

## Preventing crime

One of the main focal areas for community engagement and partnerships is crime prevention. Many law enforcement agencies use their websites to publicize neighborhood watch programs and recruit new members, including the Los Angeles and Madison (Wisconsin) Police Departments.[13] On its website, the San Diego Police Department provides a web page[14] dedicated to describing neighborhood watch plus step-by-step instructions for starting a neighborhood watch program. Because neighborhood watch is such a popular nationwide program, similar information can be found on many other law enforcement agencies' websites.

Some jurisdictions utilize listserves and e-mail groups in conjunction with neighborhood watch to enhance information sharing, not just between the police department and participating residents but also among residents themselves. For example, the South Loop neighborhood[15] in Chicago uses the free service Google Groups[16] for communication among members. The e-mail group is run by the neighborhood watch itself, rather than the police department or the local neighborhood alliance, and emphasizes the value of residents sharing information directly with each other to supplement the bulletins and alerts the police department sends.[17]

For example, when a neighborhood resident reports information about a crime or suspicious activity to the department, there is some delay (possibly significant) before the police can send that information back out to neighborhood residents. However, if a resident provides that information to the e-mail group and the police at the same time, it is made available to other residents immediately, possibly enhancing resident safety or increasing the chances that another resident will spot the suspect or see something else of interest.

One of the pioneers in this approach to neighborhood-level information sharing was Lieutenant Lawrence Green of the Oakland (California) Police Department who created an e-mail group in 2002 for the Neighborhood Crime Prevention Councils in the area of his command. Because the police department's website at that time did not provide much crime data, he fed geographically specific crime information to his e-mail group, including information about suspects and wanted persons that the police department was actively looking for.[18]

This information and the interaction that took place among police and residents within the lieutenant's e-mail group significantly strengthened community engagement and resident participation in crime prevention activities. The e-mail group provided regular opportunities for Oakland's urban neighborhood-based officers and the citizens in their assigned neighborhoods to interact, albeit electronically, in the traditional manner of small-town police and their constituents.[19]

### Detecting crime

Traditionally, crime prevention advice to community residents has taken the form of "eyes and ears:" i.e., encouraging people to watch their neighborhoods and other public spaces and call the police if they see anything suspicious. However, thanks to the increased transiency of neighborhood residents, the busy lives that people now lead, and the trend toward backyard decks instead of front porches, the number of neighborly eyes keeping watch on sidewalks, streets, and parks is not what it used to be. At the same time, however, there has been a corresponding increase in electronic eyes: i.e., closed-circuit television (CCTV) and other forms of surveillance cameras.

The dramatic increase in the use of CCTV technology, coupled with the Internet, creates a potential new way for the public to play the "eyes and ears" role. If live CCTV camera feeds were available for watching on the Internet, people might watch them and spot suspicious activity.[20] Needless to say, several important issues immediately come to mind: e.g., whether the cameras should be focused on public or private places, whether viewers' motives would be strictly altruistic, and whether the quality of video and audio would be good enough to enable viewers to discern the suspicious from the innocent.

The Big Brother scenario in which millions of cameras continuously scan every inch of the earth while millions of people sit at home and watch the cameras is harrowing indeed. By the same token, if a police department could get its constituents to spend time online watching live CCTV camera footage of public spaces that otherwise would go unwatched, as is often the case today, perhaps that increase in "eyes and ears" and community engagement would prove quite beneficial.

Online CCTV monitoring is already a reality. Internet Eyes,[21] a company in the United Kingdom, has enlisted paid monitors to watch live Internet CCTV footage from retail shops to detect shoplifting and other crimes. Initially, the company planned to include monitoring outside of CCTV as well, but it had to scale back and modify its plans to satisfy privacy concerns and legal requirements overseen by the UK Information Commissioner's Office.[22]

While limited, it would be quite a surprise if this initial foray does not get expanded to public CCTV, whether in the United Kingdom or somewhere in the United States. If and when that does happen, law enforcement agencies will probably get some crime detection benefit from electronic "eyes and ears."

The issue, however, will be at what cost to privacy. Agencies will also need to establish guidelines for processing the likely increase in electronic alerts. And only time will tell whether the operational impact on policing will be mainly positive, thanks to more civic-minded community engagement, or whether it will be more negative, similar to the drain on police resources attributable to false alarms.

## Social networking

Social networking has been all the rage over the last few years, in many ways pushing Internet websites into the category of yesterday's technology. As of 2012, there are an estimated 850 million Facebook users, 300 million Twitter users, and 120 million LinkedIn users.[23] Many law enforcement agencies have set up Facebook pages and established Twitter accounts, sometimes at the expense of maintaining and updating their websites.

An agency's website, however, is still the most economical place to store detailed and extensive information and provide many services, such as filing a crime report or applying for a job. A balanced approach to e-policing should incorporate both social media and Internet websites. In fact, one of the most important uses of social media can be to attract users to the agency's website. (For more information about police use of social media, see "Providing Information to the Community" on page 7 and "Soliciting Information from the Community" on page 19).

Social media is more interactive and proactive than a website, and its greatest potential lies in social networking. A spokesman for the Hastings Police Station in the United Kingdom demonstrates this in the following comment about Twitter:

> The advantages are clear, better engagement with the public. Hastings have over 600 followers, and this grows by about 25 a week at the moment. We get people chatting to us like they would on the street, telling us about things that affect where they live, but also saying they like to feel they can chat to a [police officer]. Twitter is like stopping the "bobby on the beat" for a chat, but the bonus is that he/she doesn't need to be in your street at the time.[24]

Twitter certainly provides an efficient method for communicating electronically with members of the public, 140 characters at a time. For example, the Arlington (Texas) Police Department has initiated regular Tweet-alongs to simulate in-person ride-alongs,[25] and many agencies are using social media to seek information to solve crimes.[26]

Furthermore, each of these mediums have synergistic possibilities. For example, many people forward tweets to all of their followers, and many people use their Facebook page as their personal homepage on the Internet. If they visited their local law enforcement agency's Facebook page and became a "fan" by clicking the "like" button, then that agency's updates will appear on their fans' Facebook pages. This can be a powerful communication tool for the agency specifically because many people regularly visit their Facebook pages (and those of their friends) and often leave their pages open while they are on their computer doing something else. Also, many constituents seem to find a typical Facebook page friendlier and more appealing than a more formal agency website.[27]

Arguably, the networking value of social media such as Facebook extends beyond just gaining fans and sending updates to them. Disseminating news updates or feature stories from the department's Facebook page may give the information a different flavor and make the agency seem less formal or rigid and more up-to-date. Sometimes the medium is the message.

Also, having fans suggests an element of approval and appreciation that is not often directly expressed to the police department in other settings can remind police personnel of the support they have from the community. When residents or members of a law enforcement agency see how many fans their agency has, that by itself may have a positive effect on their outlook. Finally, Facebook users comprise a kind of virtual community. Thus, when a police department participates, it too becomes a part of that community, which, of course, is a fundamental aspect of community policing.

Another powerful aspect of social media tools is that many people access them from smart phones and other handheld devices. This means information can reach people, and people can send information, not just when they are sitting at home or at work in front of a computer but also when they are out and about in the community (though not while driving).

This creates an opportunity for the police to engage a social network of mobile "eyes and ears." An alert posted on Facebook or sent via Twitter or a text message can reach people who are in a position to be watchful. In principle, a significant portion of the community can be instantly apprised of an emergency situation or, alternatively, notified that an emergency is over. These same people can send information to the police based on what they are seeing—information that might be helpful in assessing the situation and responding effectively. This kind of application might be especially powerful in well-defined settings such as schools, college campuses, and sporting events.[28]

Using social networking with a different twist, the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency in Washington, D.C., used podcasts and blogging as methods to publicize a Fugitive Safe Surrender (FSS) campaign in 2007.[29] These new media techniques were employed because officials realized that reaching the public via traditional radio, TV, and newspaper publicity had become more difficult. Podcasts, blogs, and other non-traditional media were used to direct fugitives and their family members to the FSS website that explained the program and presented persuasive testimonials. The 3-day blitz succeeded in getting 530 fugitives to surrender.

This example helps emphasize that law enforcement agencies have to be nimble and modern in their use of technology to accomplish a traditional and basic police function effectively: i.e., communicating with the public. At one time, wanted posters tacked to light poles may have been an effective communication method, while another era involved displaying them on the local 6 o'clock TV news that almost everybody watched.

Today, police agencies have to use various communication channels and media to reach the public. Because of the fragmentation of news media since the introduction of cable television and then the explosion in technology and alternative media, figuring out how to reach the public with the right messages may now be more complicated than ever before. But in many ways, the objective of engaging the public has not changed and remains one of the key ingredients of community policing.[30]

## Issues and considerations

Community engagement is a core ingredient of community policing and one that is well-suited for enhancement through use of the web and social media. The more that people "live" on the web, the more it makes sense for police to engage them there. The police should recognize, however, that community engagement is still challenging. Not everyone is online, not everyone is willing to become more active in working with the police for community safety, and many people are so busy that getting their attention, much less their participation, is nearly impossible.

Engaging community residents electronically has some of the same issues and limitations as traditional methods—the subset of the community that becomes engaged may be small, may not represent the entire community, and may represent special interests rather than the general public's.

Also, engaged residents must be aware of legal and practical limits regarding what they can do on behalf of community safety. A police agency has to be careful with the instructions and guidelines it gives to engaged community members and has to be cautious to not raise the public's expectations of police participation beyond what the agency can actually deliver. None of these are reasons to avoid community engagement or limit the use of the web to enhance engagement, but they are realistic considerations that should not be overlooked.

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3.  See "Durham Police Department," City of Durham, http://durhamnc.gov/ich/op/DPD/Pages/Home.aspx.

4.  "PSN: E-mail Listserv," City of Durham, http://durhamnc.gov/ich/op/DPD/Pages/PSNlistserv.aspx.

5.  See "Seminole County Sheriff's Office," www.seminolesheriff.org/external/Main.aspx.

6.  See "Community Partnerships," Seminole County Sheriff's Office, www.seminolesheriff.org/external/InfoSitePage.aspx?pageID=82.

7.  See "Snohomish County Sheriff's Office," http://sheriff.snoco.org.

8.  See "Our Community," Snohomish County Sheriff's Office, http://sheriff.snoco.org/Our_Community/Our_Community.htm.

9.  See "Police Department," City of Wheat Ridge, www.ci.wheatridge.co.us/index.aspx?NID=205.

10. "Community Partnerships," City of Wheat Ridge, www.ci.wheatridge.co.us/index.aspx?nid=244.

11. See "National Community Safety Network," www.community-safety.net.

12. See "CRP News," www.crp-news.com.

13. See "E-Policing," City of Los Angeles, www.lapdonline.org/e_policing; "How to Start a Neighborhood Watch," City of Madison, Wisconsin, www.cityofmadison.com/police/specialunits/neighborhoodWatch.cfm.

14. See "Neighborhood Watch," City of San Diego, www.sandiego.gov/police/services/prevention/programs/neighborhoodwatch.shtml.

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# Problem Solving

Problem solving through problem-oriented policing—one of the most essential components of community policing—aims to redefine the focus of police work:[1] i.e., to be proactive instead of reactive like "911 policing," which is almost entirely incident-oriented.[2]

In reactive mode, the police respond to crimes and other crises after they occur, take reports, conduct investigations, and then wait for the next incident to occur. Although police responses and investigations may be professional and efficient, the focus is almost entirely on the symptoms of crime and disorder rather than the causes. The police operate much like emergency room doctors who address each patient's immediate needs and then turn to the next patient.

When the police take a problem-oriented approach, however, they behave more like public health doctors; they look for groups of incidents and patterns of crimes that may be generated by the same underlying condition, and then they try to identify and fix that condition. This may involve focusing on a particular tavern, motel, or convenience store, for example, that seems to generate more than its share of crime and calls for service. Or this method might involve focusing on a broader set of behaviors that are problematic, such as aggressive driving or school truancy.

Besides taking this more proactive and preventive approach, problem-oriented policing also emphasizes that the best solutions often include more than just enforcement. The logic of problem solving requires that problems, once identified, be carefully analyzed. After problems are well understood, then responses are selected that fit the specific nature of the problem to reduce future occurrence.

The analogy of a tool belt applies well; sometimes a hammer is the right tool, but sometimes a screwdriver or pliers or sandpaper or glue is needed. The problem-oriented approach encourages the police to choose the best tool (or tools) for each job, once the circumstances and conditions are well understood. Responses should be customized and tailor-made, not one-size-fits-all.[3]

## Promoting problem solving

One way a police department's website and e-policing strategy can support problem solving is simply by publicizing and promoting it. This is important because a problem-oriented approach to policing takes time and energy. An impatient or ill-informed public might sometimes pressure its police agency for more enforcement or quicker response times to routine calls, either of which could detract from problem-solving efforts that promise greater impact and more effectiveness in the long run.

Naturally, of course, law enforcement agencies have to balance competing demands and explain their strategies to the community. Because problem solving is far less likely to make the front-page or the lead story on the 6 o'clock news than a sensational crime or major arrest, other more proactive methods of conveying problem-solving efforts and accomplishments to the public may be required.

One police department that publicizes its problem-solving activities on its website is **Port Washington, Wisconsin**.[4] The police chief's welcome statement emphasizes the agency's commitment to community policing and problem solving:

> The Port Washington Police Department is a problem-solving agency. We seek to improve our environment by reducing and/or eliminating opportunities for crime. Our officers engage in [problem-oriented policing] as part of our fundamental mission. We have a talented and dedicated workforce of men and women that pride themselves in customer service. We value the numerous partnerships we have established within our community as a method of sharing responsibility in preventing crime and disorder.[5]

On a **separate page**,[6] the department lists its problem-solving projects that have been opened and completed since 2006. The information provided on each project includes the lead officer/employee, location, date, nature and description of the problem, and stage of completion. For example, one project from 2010 pertained to a traffic problem in a school zone:

> Due to the re-working of Lincoln Ave. and Portview Dr. to allow traffic to flow all the way to W. Grand Ave. from Portview Dr., there is significantly more traffic that flows eastbound on Lincoln Ave. from Portview Dr. This extra traffic flow, combined with the morning and after school traffic, makes watching speeds in this area a priority during peak times. It was noted that there is no signage posted on Lincoln Ave. near Portview Dr. indicating to drivers that they are approaching a school zone. It was also noted that there is a 15-mph speed sign posted east of the eastern-most driveway to the main entrance of Dunwiddie School. It was felt that by the time drivers see this sign, they have already passed the main entrance to the school and were heading away from the school zone. It was proposed that this sign be relocated to the area of Portview Dr. and Lincoln Ave. City Administrator was spoken to regarding this concern and gave the go-ahead to have the Street Department move this sign. The sign was relocated on Lincoln Ave., just east of Portview Dr., prior to the new school year.[7]

### Identifying problems

Using social media and websites to help identify problems is becoming more and more common. To some extent, this approach overlaps with 311 lines, tip lines, and tip sites, all of which are quite common. These traditional tip lines and websites generally solicit information from the public to help solve specific crimes, identify drug dealing locations, and locate wanted persons. A more problem-oriented approach also seeks the public's help in identifying neighborhood problems and conditions that are associated with crime and disorder.

Sometimes these efforts are combined with other city or county services, as in Madison, Wisconsin, where the city's website invites residents to **report a problem**.[8] The list of problem categories includes erosion control, potholes, and refuse collection, as well as problems that are likely to be referred to the police department, such as abandoned vehicles, graffiti, parking enforcement, and traffic enforcement.

The Madison (Wisconsin) Police Department's web page emphasizes its commitment to community policing and also problem solving:

> We are committed to adopting a problem-solving model of policing in which we address the root causes of problems rather than implementing only a quick fix. Members of the department are encouraged to try new and otherwise non-traditional policing methods in working with the community and other government agencies.[9]

The **Mesquite (Texas) Police Department**[10] is another agency that uses its web page to get the public's help in identifying problems. The department also explains how the problem-solving approach works:

> The Mesquite Police Department has designed our [problem-oriented policing] program so that one police supervisor is responsible for each police district within the city. These supervisors coordinate all of the [problem-oriented policing] programs within their particular area. In order to ensure that problems are identified and addressed, they receive crime data for the area and reports from officers who work the area. Of course, they also interact with residents and businesses of the area to get their input. The officers who work that area receive the same information that the supervisor does and provide feedback on programs or problems that need to be addressed. Citizens are encouraged to participate in the process and can provide input either directly to an officer or through the **City of Mesquite's website**.[11]

On a separate page, the police department provides a **map of the city** divided into nine districts, and residents are encouraged to share information about "possible criminal activity and quality of life issues that the police department can address."[12] The web page goes on to explain that:

> Selecting an area of the map and entering information about police-related issues is a way for you to communicate directly with the responsible supervisor and with the patrol officers who work the streets of your area (through the computer in their vehicle). Please provide any information that you think would be helpful to those officers.[13]

As police use of social media expands, it can be expected that Facebook and Twitter will be increasingly used as additional vehicles for soliciting the community's assistance in identifying crime and disorder problems that might deserve concentrated police attention. When combined with smart phones and other handheld devices, these media have the advantage of mobility and immediacy. In fact, police agencies can expect to receive photographs of problems, not just text.

However, website applications will still be desirable as well, as they usually elicit more complete descriptions of problems and can be formatted in a way that solicits specific pieces of information that are beneficial for problem solving. In that vein, perhaps the most useful item is re-contact information, if the reporting person is willing to provide it, so additional information can be requested, so police-public collaboration can be initiated when appropriate, and so the police department can report back to the person about what has been done to resolve the problem.

### Collaborating in problem solving

One of the most promising ways that police agencies might use listserves, blogs, and social networking (for more information, see "Engaging the Community" on page 32) is in furtherance of problem solving. Engaged residents can do more than just help the police identify crime and disorder problems; they can help the police understand why problems exist and persist, they can participate in brainstorming for solutions, they can actually be part of the solution in some cases, and, after responses have been implemented, they can help the police determine whether the effort has been successful. These are all well-established roles for the public to play in collaborative problem solving.

The advantages that social networking offers to collaborative problem solving are mainly related to inclusiveness and convenience. In general, holding a series of face-to-face meetings with community residents might be preferable for getting their input and participation in identifying crime and disorder problems, analyzing those problems, searching for tailor-made responses, planning the implementation of those responses, and assessing the impact on the problem once actions are taken.

However, getting people to attend community meetings can be difficult, and sometimes the attendees do not represent the entire community. Engaging residents and partners online may generate broader and more robust participation. However, the police will need to take the lead in organizing and guiding this kind of online discussion and problem solving, or they may be able to hand off those responsibilities to community leaders.[14]

Using electronic networks and new media to enhance collaborative problem solving is arguably the most significant contribution that e-policing might make to community policing. A neighborhood-based officer could be part of a virtual network of residents and partners, soliciting and sharing information electronically to identify and solve community problems. Many more residents could have personal (albeit electronic) contact with this beat cop than would likely occur if the officer just walked the beat or rode it on a bicycle. In principle, many more residents could feel engaged with the police, could contribute to community safety, and could be kept informed of successes and challenges.

### Issues and considerations

The problem-solving component of community policing has tremendous potential. It is the primary means by which community policing directly tackles crime and disorder in a more thorough and in-depth manner than is usually achieved through traditional reactive policing. In the early years of community policing, critics commonly asked, "Where's the beef?" Problem solving is the beef. It builds on the processes and relationships characteristic of community policing by adding an operational methodology for reducing crime and disorder.

However, some problem solving is too police-centric. If the police identify a community's problems in isolation, they may not identify the problems that actually concern the residents. If the police tackle problems by themselves, they may cause resentment or misunderstanding, they may reinforce the community's dependency on others, and their responses, even if effective, may not be sustainable or even noticed. Thus, problem solving needs to be collaborative in order to build resilience and sustainability and to make sure the right problems are being addressed.

The Internet and social media provide tremendous opportunities for the police to collaborate with the public in problem solving. More and more problems are likely to come to police attention via social media, and these same channels offer a means for the police to get people thinking about problems, underlying conditions, and solutions. One caveat, perhaps, is that most of this electronic communication is of the sound-bite variety. Accomplishing an in-depth analysis of crime and disorder problems, a thorough review of potential options, and a systematic implementation of tailor-made responses—140 characters at a time— may be difficult. But the disconnect between instant gratification and authentic problem solving may be the most challenging hurdle facing community policing in the electronic future.

1.   Goldstein, H., *Problem-Oriented Policing* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990).

2.   Sparrow, M.K., M.H. Moore, and D.M. Kennedy, *Beyond 911: A New Era for Policing* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

3.   For more information about problem-oriented policing and examples of its application, see the Center for Problem-Oriented Policing, www.popcenter.org.

4.   See "Port Washington Police Department," http://pwpd.org.

5.   "Message from the Chief," Port Washington Police Department, http://pwpd.org/about_message.html.

6.   "Problem-Oriented Policing Initiatives," Port Washington Police Department, http://pwpd.org/reports_statistics_problem.html.

7.   Ibid.

8.   See "Report a Problem & Service Requests," City of Madison, Wisconsin, https://www.cityofmadison.com/ReportAProblem/.

9.   See "Chief Wray's Welcome," City of Madison, Wisconsin, www.cityofmadison.com/police/about/welcome.cfm.

10.  See "Mesquite Police," City of Mesquite, www.cityofmesquite.com/police_web/.

11.  "Problem Oriented Policing," City of Mesquite, www.cityofmesquite.com/police_web/popprogram.php.

12.  See "Problem Oriented Policing," City of Mesquite, www.cityofmesquite.com/police_web/pop/index.php.

13.  Ibid.

14.  This was the experience in Oakland, California, where Lieutenant Lawrence Green started the listserve but was able to hand it off to community crime prevention leaders. It was important for neighborhood officers and area commanders to stay engaged on the listserve, but they did not have to run it.

# About the COPS Office

The Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) is the component of the U.S. Department of Justice responsible for advancing the practice of community policing by the nation's state, local, territory, and tribal law enforcement agencies through information and grant resources.

Community policing is a philosophy that promotes organizational strategies that support the systematic use of partnerships and problem-solving techniques, to proactively address the immediate conditions that give rise to public safety issues such as crime, social disorder, and fear of crime.

Rather than simply responding to crimes once they have been committed, community policing concentrates on preventing crime and eliminating the atmosphere of fear it creates. Earning the trust of the community and making those individuals stakeholders in their own safety enables law enforcement to better understand and address both the needs of the community and the factors that contribute to crime.

The COPS Office awards grants to state, local, territory, and tribal law enforcement agencies to hire and train community policing professionals, acquire and deploy cutting-edge crime fighting technologies, and develop and test innovative policing strategies. COPS Office funding also provides training and technical assistance to community members and local government leaders and all levels of law enforcement. The COPS Office has produced and compiled a broad range of information resources that can help law enforcement better address specific crime and operational issues, and help community leaders better understand how to work cooperatively with their law enforcement agency to reduce crime.

- Since 1994, the COPS Office has invested nearly $14 billion to add community policing officers to the nation's streets, enhance crime fighting technology, support crime prevention initiatives, and provide training and technical assistance to help advance community policing.
- By the end of FY2012, the COPS Office has funded approximately 124,000 additional officers to more than 13,000 of the nation's 18,000 law enforcement agencies across the country in small and large jurisdictions alike.
- Nearly 700,000 law enforcement personnel, community members, and government leaders have been trained through COPS Office-funded training organizations.
- As of 2012, the COPS Office has distributed more than 8.5 million topic-specific publications, training curricula, white papers, and resource CDs.

COPS Office resources, covering a wide breadth of community policing topics—from school and campus safety to gang violence—are available, at no cost, through its online Resource Center at www.cops.usdoj.gov. This easy-to-navigate website is also the grant application portal, providing access to online application forms.

*E-COP: Using the Web to Enhance Community Oriented Policing* highlights those technologies that are changing the way police are engaging with communities and delivering services. The pace with which electronic and digital technology have permeated modern policing has been remarkable. Some digital technology has miniaturized what law enforcement agencies already do, as in the case of police radios, or has sped up what they do, thanks to computers. More significant are those technologies that have allowed and encouraged police departments to revise their organizational strategies, policies, and routines. This intentionally brief publication illustrates some of the ways in which e-policing can support and enhance community policing. From tweeting with the community to soliciting information from online anonymous tip sites, the police are using the Internet, websites, and other digital technologies to enhance their community policing efforts. While police officers will probably still have to handle calls, investigate crimes, make arrests, and otherwise represent police authority in person, the domain of e-policing is rapidly expanding. The potential benefits of the Internet and social networking for enhancing community policing are only just beginning to be realized.