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CRIME PREVENTION FOR RURAL AREAS

by

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences, March 12-14, 1980.

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CASE STUDY #3

Extensive publicity about the crime prevention workshop had been circulated by law enforcement officers of this suburban town for nearly two weeks. Radio "spot announcements," short public service notices on the television, and a half-page ad in the local newspaper, all in turn had the same basic message: "ONLY YOU CAN PUT A STOP TO CRIME IN YOUR COMMUNITY."

The officers spent many extra off-duty hours planning and organizing the workshop. It was scheduled for a week night, from 7:00 P.M. to 10:00 P.M. and included a number of crime prevention experts to talk about tips on "home security," "rape prevention," "how to be a good witness," "how to avoid muggings," and "con and fraud tactics." In addition, the nearby regional headquarters of the State Police were to set up an impressive display of deadbolt locks, burglar alarms, and other home security hardware.

The state grant to set up the one night workshop was designed to "teach crime prevention to John and Jane Doe before the crime occurs!" The workshop was viewed as innovative because, according to the police chief: "the law enforcement officer comes face-to-face with the law-abiding public only after a major crime has occurred, and in an atmosphere of tension and high emotions."

The "big" night came, and the auditorium at the town's community center was filled with nearly 100 persons. Nearly 50 of the participants consisted of law enforcement officers from other nearby towns acting as "official observers." About 50 were citizens.

For three hours the speakers strode to the podium and delivered their particular messages. The participants examined the lock display with great curiosity. When it was over, and two of the officers from the town were folding and stacking chairs, one was overheard as saying: "You know, people just don't care. You would think that in a town of 15,000 and with all the crime we have, a few more people would have shown up." The other officer sarcastically replied: "And the ones who were here aren't going to remember 95% of what they heard."

CAST STUDY #16

The Sheriff's Department's public information officer for this county of 60,000 persons recently had reached a crossroads in his thinking about how to do "good, quality crime prevention." He explained: "I'm tired of speaking to 500 people, only 10 of whom are really listening, and those 10 to only half of what I have to say."

His measure of success was "a high compliance rate." By this he meant the degree to which his suggestions would be followed. He reasoned that there

would be a greater chance for the average citizen to seriously listen to his suggestions in a "face-to-face situation" in contrast to the "mass audience approach." Also, he had gone "somewhat sour, although I still do them," on the public service television announcements because "they're only on before you get up or after you go to bed."

He summed up his philosophy on reaching the general public this way: "I would rather talk to 10 people and have 5 follow my advice, than speak to an audience of 500 people and only have 1% remember what I said several days later."

He admitted there was a problem with respect to reaching a significant proportion of the 30,000 suburbanites, farmers, and rural dwellers under the jurisdiction of the county Sheriff's Department. His solution, however, was simple: "We need more public information officers, but we can't do it at the expense of taking guys off patrol duty and other law enforcement responsibilities; so that leaves as the only solution to get the county commissioners to raise property tax levies and hire about 10 more fellas like myself to do crime prevention."

CASE STUDY # 8

This small town of 400 people had never experienced much crime. However, several housewives became concerned about their "personal security" and that of their "family and home" while reading an account of an armed robbery at the county seat about 20 miles away. Two of the ladies took the lead and decided to "see what our town can do to prevent crime around here!" These two individuals held several informal "tea and coffee" meetings with a group of about 10 other housewives who were known as "good organizers and good workers." Together, they outlined an idea for a series of three crime prevention workshops which were to be held "before spring planting," and on Monday nights "because the local basketball games are on Tuesday and Thursday nights." Since there was no local community center, the three workshops were rotated between facilities at the Baptist, Methodist, and Catholic churches in the town.

The "planning committee," as they called themselves, wanted the first workshop to talk about the "kinds of crime problems that would confront a little town like ours." The second workshop would be about home security. The third workshop was reserved for "issues developed during the first two workshops." The planning committee also decided to reserve the first half-hour to "getting acquainted over refreshments," about one hour for talks and information from the police and crime prevention specialists who were invited in from other towns, and another 30 minutes for questions and answers. "If it gets any longer, no one will want to come back."

The committee put a notice about the first workshop in the weekly town newspaper, but reserved most of the "get out the vote" effort to announcements in church, and door-to-door persuasion. The end result was that over half the town showed up for the workshop, and nearly as many for the next two.

Since the town only had a part-time deputy, the speakers were brought in from the police department of a large town about 40 miles away, and from

the State Department of Public Safety. These officers and crime prevention specialists "had never seen anything like it. The people were interested and had good questions. I wish city folks were as concerned as those folks were!"

Introduction: Law Enforcement and Crime Prevention

These three case studies represent stylized accounts of actual situations and events. Their purpose is to illustrate that successfully "doing" crime prevention is an elusive goal, and a task which requires hard work, patience, and a great deal of time. The case studies also illustrate that crime prevention is basically, education, and the nature of the educational process is the exchange of information (i.e., facts, ideas, opinions) between people. In other words, the essence of crime prevention is people.

Police personnel serve two basic functions: law enforcement and crime prevention (Steadman, 1972). The law enforcement function is generally responsive in nature (i.e., investigating crimes, apprehending criminals, enforcing state laws and local ordinances etc.). Most police and sheriff's departments are structured to "enforce laws." Few seriously attempt to serve the crime prevention function.

The first two case studies demonstrate the basic dilemma of most police agencies. First, with the emphasis on law enforcement, most agencies do not have the resources to increase personnel for a serious and extensive attempt into crime prevention. Second, where such efforts have been made, they often fail because most police agencies are inexperienced or lack proper expertise in "organizing the community." In other words, most police agencies do not know how to deliver information within an educational framework.

The Case of Rural America

Crime in rural America is on the increase. Research by Smith and

Donnermeyer (1979) in a north central Indiana agricultural community has revealed a victimization rate equivalent to cities of 50,000. The burglary rate was higher than the United States average as revealed through the national victimization surveys sponsored by the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (U.S. Department of Justice, 1976). The California Farm Bureau estimated that the state's farmers would lose nearly \$30 million from property theft alone in 1977 (Footlick, 1977:101).

The increase in rural criminal offenses is reflected in a rising concern among rural residents. A series of recent Gallup polls has revealed that a larger proportion of rural residents perceive an increase in crime in their local area (46%) than do dwellers in cities of 500,000 (only 38%).

What are the facts about rural crime. The patterns listed below are tentative, but do reveal that the image of a "crime-free" rural America is today, largely a myth.

- (1) Most offenses occurring to rural residents are property offenses (Phillips, 1975; Smith and Donnermeyer, 1979).
- (2) Crimes experienced by rural residents tend to be of a less serious nature, over-all, than among urban residents (Gibbons, 1972; Dinitz, 1973; Beran and Allen, 1974; Phillips, 1975; and Smith and Donnermeyer, 1979).
- (3) A large proportion of crimes occurring to rural urban centers, such as at shopping malls and factories or other places of employment. The proportion of offenses occurring to rural residents in urban areas, or outside the county of residence, is higher than the proportion experienced by urban residents when outside of the urban area (Smith and Donnermeyer, 1979).
- (4) The most frequent property crime incidents reported by rural residents are burglary and vandalism (Phillips, 1975; Smith and Donnermeyer, 1979). In particular, Phillips (1975) reported that vandalism was the leading crime in nine rural Ohio counties, making up 38% of all reported incidents. Vandalism was also found to be one of the leading

crimes in research from two Indiana counties (Smith and Donnermeyer, 1979; Donnermeyer, Forthcoming.

- (5) Vandalism is a "youth" phenomenon, and approximately one-half of rural youths at the high school level commit one or more acts of vandalism (Phillips, and Bartlett, 1976; Donnermeyer, Forthcoming.
- (6) Less than one-half of all criminal offenses occurring to rural residents are reported to the police (Phillips, 1975; Smith and Donnermeyer, 1979).
- (7) Rural residents are less prone to practice simple home security and other preventive behaviors. An informal survey among Farm Bureau members in 12 Indiana counties found that: (a) only 60% always locked their doors to their home at night or when they are away from the home for any period of time; (b) nearly one-third left their keys in the ignition of their car, truck, or tractor when not in use because it was "convenient;" and (c) less than 10% of the farm operators marked or engraved their heavy farm machinery.

The Problem of Crime Prevention for Rural Law Enforcement

The implications of these trends are ominous for rural police agencies and as well, for residents in small towns and rural areas. How will rural communities in general respond? How will county sheriffs, police chiefs, and town marshalls react?

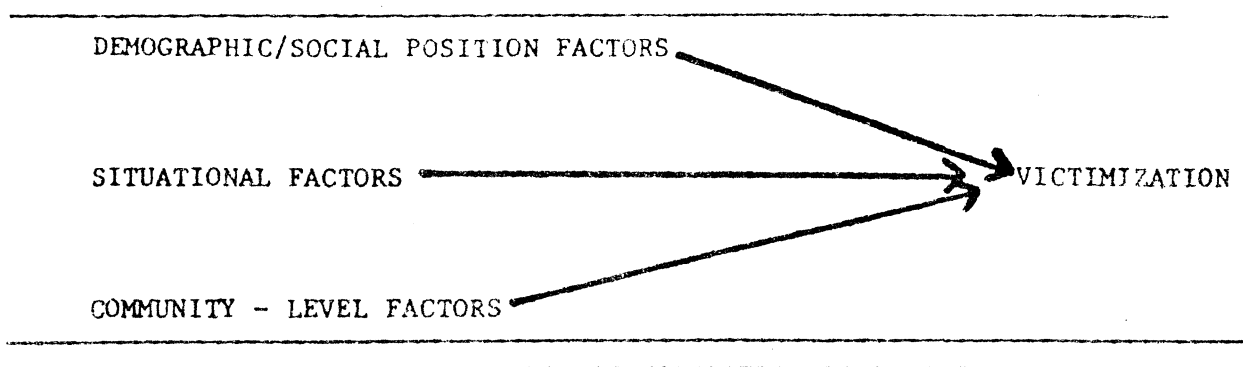
Rural police forces are handicapped in several ways. The small size of rural police departments is one. Jurisdiction over large geographic areas is another. The choice for rural communities is to either upgrade rural police departments or find alternative methods for dealing with a growing crime problem.

Types of Crime Prevention Strategies

What are the alternative solutions to crime? There are many and it is not the purpose of this paper to address all of them. Figure 1 below graphically presents a general overview of factors which contribute to the prob-

ability that a person or household will be victimized.

FIGURE 1: FACTORS AFFECTING THE PROBABILITY OF CRIMINAL VICTIMIZATION



The demographic/social position factors refer to the social class variables of income, occupational, educational status, and other factors including age, sex, and race. Statistics demonstrate that there are unequal probabilities of being the victim of a crime according to these factors (Nettler, 1974). For example, young males are nearly ten times more likely to be the victims of violent crimes than elderly females. It is difficult for specific crime prevention programs to address these factors because they are not easily manipulated or changed (although crime prevention programs may be targeted to particular sub-groups of the population).

Situational factors refer to circumstances surrounding a criminal incident, such as whether or not doors were locked etc. Situational factors refer to the degree of opportunity afforded to the offender by the victim. These factors are manipulatable insofar as the potential victim (i.e., all community members) can be taught to reduce opportunities which may place the individual in more vulnerable circumstances.

The third set of factors are community-level, and refer to the interaction, patterns of the local community. For instance, Conklin (1975) found that the community-wide effects of the mass murder of a family in Holcomb, Kansas in

1959 (upon which Truman Capote wrote his famous book, In Cold Blood), reduced, on a long-term basis, the cohesion or horizontal integration of its members (Warren, 1978). As Conklin observed: "Crime generates fear, suspicion, and distrust and thus diminishes social interaction. As a community is atomized, solidarity weakens and informal social controls dissipate. The result is a high crime rate, since restraints on criminal behavior are released."

Other community-level factors would include the existence of support and rehabilitative services for handling broken home situations, juvenile and adult offenders etc. For example, youth projects, the amount of supervision and the disciplinary philosophy within the local school system, are community-level factors which bear on the volume of criminal incidents that will occur to members of the community. The absence or inadequate operation of such programs may contribute to a growing volume of crime in rural areas, because as Phillips (1976) has noted, most offenders who commit crimes in rural areas are from the same or adjacent counties.

Table 1 presents five basic types of crime prevention strategies, including (1) criminal justice/criminal laws and penalties; (2) law enforcement; (3) personal and home security; (4) the neighborhood/town; and (5) youth. Examples of each type are provided, with the middle column listing some "short-run" ideas, and the right column naming more "long-run" possibilities.

TABLE 1: TYPES OF CRIME PREVENTION STRATEGIES, WITH EXAMPLES

| TYPE OF PREVENTION STRATEGY | SHORT - RUN | LONG - RUN |
|---|---|--|
| CRIMINAL JUSTICE/ CRIMINAL LAWS AND PENALTIES | Public pressure on specific criminal cases. | Court watch, increased minimum sentences. |
| LAW ENFORCEMENT | Beef-up patrols in problem areas. | Increase personnel, more or better training, etc. |
| PERSONAL AND HOME SECURITY | Porch lights on during halloween, etc. | Educational program on home security and personal safety. |
| THE NEIGHBORHOOD/ TOWN | CE patrol on halloween | Block or neighborhood associations. |
| YOUTH | Youth Center | Educational program in the schools on such topics as vandalism and drug abuse, big brothers/big sisters etc. |

Criminal justice/criminal laws and penalties refers primarily to the operation of the court system and prosecutor's office. Many communities become "outraged" at plea-bargaining, and a perception of "easy parole" and "light sentences." The cynicism often generated by this type of controversy affects the tenor of police-community relations, and, in general, how members feel about their community.

Some typical kinds of programs here would be a Court Watch program in which citizens act as observers in court. The program has a two-fold function, first to educate citizens as to how the court system operates, and second, to monitor the performance of the judge and prosecutor as public officials. In addition to the educational kinds of programs are those involving legal aid/

political action associated with the changing of state and local laws (i.e., increasing the minimum sentence for certain classes of offenses).

The second type of crime prevention is improving the quality of law enforcement. Table 1 shows, as a short-run example, the concentration of beat officers during certain "high-crime" periods or in "high-crime" areas. More long-run examples would include increased personnel, better trained personnel etc. This second type is similar to the first in several ways because both tend to involve either public policy or political issues.

The third type of crime prevention listed in Table 1 includes projects traditionally thought of as "crime prevention." The police refer to programs aimed at increasing home and personal security as "hardening the target" (i.e., locks and latches for the home and garage, self-defense for women etc.) The three case studies at the beginning of this were concerned primarily with "target hardening," although the way in which this type of education is conducted may assume many different formats. The basic problem with this type of crime prevention is not the adequacy or accuracy of the information (there are a plethora of home security etc. brochures and pamphlets written by a wealth of law enforcement and crime prevention organizations), but on determining how to effectively disseminate these facts to a target audience.

The fourth type of crime prevention strategy listed in Table 1 has to do with organizing neighborhoods or specific groups of persons within a community (i.e., a CB patrol, or a neighborhood watch or neighborhood block association.) The basic purpose of these types of programs are to strengthen the "horizontal ties" within the community. Crime prevention of this nature is directly involved with community organizing strategies.

The fifth row in Table 1 is restricted to youth programs of various types

and is particularly salient to rural communities because of the high proportion of vandalism reported by rural residents. Many of these programs may already be in existence, such as 4-H, church-related youth groups, sports leagues, school-related functions, etc.

Community Involvement and Rural Crime Prevention

As crime becomes a "public issue" in rural communities, many persons, such as probation officers, school administrators, church leaders, cooperative extension service agents, and community leaders, are likely to become involved in some way. Why is community involvement so important? The contrast in the degree of success between the first two case studies with the third indicates that there is a great deal that using the informal interaction network of a rural community can do by way of an appropriate response to crime. The unique aspect of the third case was that the crime prevention workshops were initiated and the idea was legitimized, by prominent members of the community. The police participated in an advisory capacity (i.e., upon request), in contrast to the more direct role played in the first two cases.

A community involvement approach to crime prevention would begin with the premise that the initiation, planning, and implementation of specific crime prevention strategies be the responsibility of citizens' groups, civic organizations, or community institutions (i.e., schools, churches, etc.), and that where possible, the police play only an advisory or helping role. This approach assumes several things.

- (1) Crime prevention must be conceived as a type of change because it involves such activities as teaching persons better home security techniques, development of neighborhood associations, or educational programs on drug abuse etc. Crime

prevention involves the changing of attitudes, and the modification of interaction patterns of community members.

- (2) Persons who attempt to initiate or implement crime prevention programs are "change agents." The change agent's role is to facilitate the process by which local decision-making occurs, (i.e., by supplying information, getting the "right" people together, etc.), but leaves the basic decision-making to local community members.
- (3) Crime prevention programs must be "community-based"(Trojanowicz et al., 1975; Conklin, 1975; Washnis, 1976.) Community members only become involved when they have an opportunity to define the problem for themselves, and when there are appropriate organizational structures available for participation (Phillips and Passewitz, 1978). Extant rural law enforcement and criminal justice agencies may not be as appropriate organizational structures to achieve sufficient community involvement as other groups and informal interaction networks found within rural society.

Trojanowicz et al., (1975:xii) have stated the problem with clarity and succinctness: "The authors believe that both public and criminal justice practitioners have relied excessively on the formal, punitive process to control crime. The proper focus of crime prevention efforts in nonpunitive action involving the full social capabilities of the community."

Small towns and rural communities will be increasingly forced to confront the problem of crime. The type of response, and the effectiveness of that response will be dependent upon the mix of strategies chosen, that is, the degree to which the response will be formal (punitive) or informal (non-punitive). The rural crime problem is such that many times an informal strategy is more appropriate. Informal strategies generally will only be effective when there is a strong commitment to community involvement principles.

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