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Obstacles to Developing and Implementing Problem-Oriented Policing Projects in Police Agencies

Kristine-Gem D. Estrella
University of Nevada, Las Vegas, estrell6@unlv.nevada.edu

Victoria Luong
University of Nevada, Las Vegas, luongv2@unlv.nevada.edu

Tamara D. Madensen
University of Nevada, Las Vegas, tamara.madensen@unlv.edu

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Obstacles to Developing and Implementing Problem-Oriented Policing Projects in Police Agencies
Kristine-Gem D. Estrella, Victoria Luong, and Tamara D. Madensen

Abstract
This research examines impediments to problem-solving initiatives within police organizations. A systematic evaluation of a complex problem-oriented policing (POP) project in Las Vegas, Nevada, is used to identify obstacles to developing effective crime reduction interventions. This evaluation focuses on the first three steps of the SARA problem-solving process: scanning, analysis, and response. At each stage of the project, interviews were conducted with key project personnel (e.g., area command captains, supervising sergeants, community-oriented policing officers, community partners, residents). Data were also collected through observations at community meetings and ride-alongs with officers assigned to the project. These data revealed specific implementation issues, only some of which have been identified in previous literature. Policy recommendations for both practitioners and researchers engaged in problem-solving initiatives are offered.

Description of A.C.E. Initiative
The Apartment Complex Empowerment (A.C.E.) Initiative was established to address high-crime apartment complexes within a single Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department (LVMPD) sector beat (see Figure 1). This area is considered a “durable hotspot” by police personnel. For several decades, this sector beat has consistently generated the highest crime levels within the city’s beat (see Figure 1). This area is considered a “durable hotspot” by police personnel. For several apartment complexes within a single Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department (LVMPD) sector beat, (e.g., Desert Inn Estates, Twain, Raider Villages). LVMPD officers initiated a problem-oriented policing project in this area in late 2011. The major tasks completed as part of the initial SARA problem-solving stages (i.e., scanning, analysis, and response) were:

- **Initial Problem Investigation**
  *Scanning*
  Analyses revealed that crime statistics were driven by offenses committed at apartment complexes. After an initial analysis of calls for police service (CPS) originating from all apartment complexes in this beat (n = 19), nine were targeted for intervention. These complexes are concentrated within one square mile and generated almost 2,408 CPS in 2011. It was decided that problems within these complexes would be addressed in three phases (see Figure 2).

- **Project Name and Goals**
  The problem-oriented policing project was named the Apartment Complex Empowerment (A.C.E.) Initiative, and three project objectives were defined: (1) reduce burglaries, (2) improve resident quality of life by decreasing fear, and (3) increase resident resiliency to victimization through education and increased access to social services.

- **Resident Survey and CPTED Evaluation**
  A door-to-door victimization survey was conducted in the Phase 1 complexes by local university students and officers. LVMPD crime specialists conducted CPTED surveys of the properties to identify criminogenic features of the properties.

- **Safety Fair Kick-Off**
  This interactive social event was used to “kick-off” the project. It was designed to raise awareness and educate area residents about crime/victimization and build partnerships with over twenty-two participating local businesses and organizations.

- **Monthly Resident/Manager Meetings**
  LVMPD officers hold monthly informational meetings to promote communication between residents, complex managers, and officers.

POP Implementation Challenges
Sidbottom and Tilley (2011) previously identified several obstacles to conducting successful problem-oriented policing projects:

- **Resources** - POP projects are time-consuming, and police often struggle to find time and other resources to adopt this data-intensive approach.
- **Training** - Many police practitioners do not feel that they have sufficient training to carry out effective problem-solving initiatives.
- **Bureaucracy** - Some command staff view the problem-oriented policing model as “an unnecessary bureaucratic burden.”
- **Senior officer support and champions** - Projects often fail if not supported by senior staff and championed by someone held accountable for the project’s success.
- **Premature responses** - Responses are often initiated before problems are adequately identified, analyzed, and understood.

A.C.E. Initiatives Obstacles
Police activities conducted as part of the A.C.E. Initiative were systematically documented to identify challenges specific to this problem-oriented policing project. The identified obstacles are outlined in the table below and are classified as either department-, community-, or problem-specific obstacles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROBLEM SPECIFIC OBSTACLES</th>
<th>DEPARTMENT SPECIFIC OBSTACLES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High resident turnover</td>
<td>Lack of communication between shifts/details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of community participation</td>
<td>High officer turnover/reassignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited community resources</td>
<td>Leadership limitations (inadequate knowledge of POP/little accountability/desire to skip stages)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Management turnover/lack of communication with police</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few churches/community centers</td>
<td>Business practices encourage resistance to change(e.g., need to occupy apartments)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rigorous research is difficult and slow</td>
<td>Most residents’ fears are not related to crimes traditionally handled by police</td>
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</tbody>
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Policy Implications
The A.C.E. Initiative analysis highlights both common and uncommon obstacles to problem-oriented policing projects previously identified by Sidbottom and Tilley (2011). The current study finds it useful to discuss challenges in terms of department-specific, community-specific, and problem-specific obstacles to the implementation of a successful POP project. This research suggests that barriers to POP will include challenges that stem from the particular characteristics of police department structures/personnel, community demographics, and the unique opportunity structures of specific crime types or other community concerns.

To overcome these challenges, POP projects must include:

1. Basic POP training for police leaders/staff and project participants to foster understanding and encouragement communication,
2. Detailed analysis of the targeted problem, including surveys (both formal and informal) of police and those assumed to be affected by the issue, and
3. A focus on building partnerships within the community to facilitate the goals of the project.