

The Effectiveness of Foot Patrols

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Introduction

Police foot patrols are one of the most visible facets of policing to the public (Andresen & Lau, 2014). While the origins of “walking the beat” are deeply rooted in policing¹, the practice has been revitalised by police forces since the late-1970s and is increasingly used as a tactic for hot spots policing (Ratcliffe, Groff, Sorg, & Haberman, 2015; Weisburd & Telep, 2014). The primary functions of foot patrols are to reduce crime and disorder and communicate and cooperate with citizens (Andresen & Lau, 2014). While foot patrols carry out traditional patrol activities such as responding to calls-for-service and dealing with disturbances within their walking beats, they also practice less traditional policing techniques such as community involvement, providing advice on crime prevention, and proactive targeting of criminals (Wakefield, 2007). Foot patrols are not only responsible for reducing crime, but also responsible for reducing the fear of crime (Andresen and Lau, 2014; National Research Council, 2004; Wakefield, 2007). The purpose of this research brief is to highlight the effectiveness of police foot patrol units and their impact on crime and perceptions of safety.

Q1: Are foot patrols effective in reducing crime and disorder?

Theoretical Explanations

Environmental theories of crime, including the broken windows theory (Wilson & Kelling, 1982) the routine activities theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) and the rational choice

¹ Sir Robert Peel believed that the visual presence of patrols would deter crime and disorder (Ratcliffe, Taniguchi, Groff, & Wood, 2011; Sorg, Haberman, Ratcliffe, & Taylor, 2013).

theory (Clark & Cornish, 1985), can help explain the effectiveness of foot patrol policing. These perspectives assume that criminal behaviour is situational and that some environments provide better opportunities for crime and disorder if not controlled (Malenka, 2016). They therefore offer a basis for understanding how the strategic deployment of foot patrols to specific high-crime areas can help reduce the number of criminal acts.

According to the broken windows theory, neglected disorder within an area will lead to citizen fear, break down informal social controls, and an increase in instances of more serious crime (e.g., robbery and murder) (Wilson & Kelling, 1982). To disrupt this developmental sequence, the maintenance of order is necessary. If foot patrols maintain order, address community disorder, and enforce informal social controls, they can stop the growth of serious crime and neighbourhood deterioration (Groff, Johnson, & Ratcliffe, 2013).

Within the framework of the routine activities theory, Cohen & Felson (1979) claim that for a crime to occur, there must be a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian. These three components must align in time and space. However, foot patrols can act as capable guardians within a geographical area (Doyle, Frogner, Andershed, & Andershed, 2016; Wood, Taylor, Groff, & Ratcliffe, 2015). Although some areas may have suitable targets and motivated offenders, foot patrols' guardianship enhances the chances of offenders being discovered (Doyle et al., 2016).

The rational choice theory argues that offenders make rational decisions on whether to commit a crime based on rewards and risks (Clarke & Cornish, 1985). Scholars working within the framework of this theory accept that the mere presence of foot patrols can deter individuals from committing crimes (Andresen & Lau, 2014). Therefore, the existence of foot patrols would

increase the risk of exposure, and thus may dissuade individuals from committing criminal acts (Ariel, Weinborn, & Sherman, 2016; Groff et al., 2013).

Empirical Explanations

Since the late-1970s, there has been more investigation into foot patrols by scholars and the police, followed by studies that evaluate their effectiveness in reducing crime and disorder, as well as their impact on community-police relations and their influence on perceptions of crime. The Newark Foot Patrol Experiment (NFPE) was the first study to do this by comparing areas with foot patrol to areas without them (Kelling, Pate, Ferrara, Utne, & Brown, 1981). Although foot patrols did not reduce crime according to the study, they had a positive effect on how citizens perceived crime and the police force; residents felt safer and more satisfied with the police when foot patrols were present (Kelling et al., 1981). Like the NFPE, the Flint Foot Patrol Experiment (FFPE) contributed to positive perceptions about crime (e.g. citizens feeling safer) and encouraged police-community relations; residents felt that the police were more active in preventing crime and working towards mutual respect (Trojanowitz, 1982; Andresen & Lau, 2014). However, Trojanowitz (1982) found that crime was reduced by almost nine percent in areas with foot patrol, contrary to the findings from the NFPE.

More recently, studies including the Philadelphia Foot Patrol Experiment (PFPE) and the Lower Lonsdale Foot Patrol Initiative (LLFPI) have been conducted. These initiatives provide further support for crime reduction through the implementation of foot patrols. Through a controlled random trial of violent hot spots during the summer of 2009, the PFPE revealed that targeting high-crime hot spots using foot patrols reduced violent crime; crime dropped by 23% in treatment areas with foot patrols compared to the control areas with normal police service (Ratcliffe et al., 2011). Correspondingly, the LLFPI discovered a reduction in calls-for-service as

well as a decrease in commercial burglary and mischief after foot patrols were implemented (Andresen & Lau, 2014; Melenka, 2016).

Notably, preventative patrol techniques are dependent on the physical and situational factors of an environment (Andresen & Lau, 2014). There are hot spots and “hot times” for crime, and policing in micro-sized areas may optimize the potential for patrols to lead to a decrease in crime (Weisburd, Bernasco, & Bruinsma, 2009; Weisburd & Telep, 2014). For example, the Minneapolis Hot Spots Experiment discovered that an increase in police presence in hot spots during hot times deters crime (Sherman & Weisburd, 1995). Ideally, an officer should stop at a hot spot for approximately 14-15 minutes to properly deter criminal acts from occurring in that area (Koper, 1995). Foot patrol initiatives need to be aware of the hot spots, hot times, and length of time to monitor a location to properly reduce crime. Both the PPF and the LLFPI staggered the number of officers patrolling by the day of the week and time of day according to the crime trends within the area.

Furthermore, crime is not displaced to other surrounding areas when foot patrols are introduced to a hot spot or geographical area (Ariel et al., 2016; Andresen & Lau, 2014; Andresen & Malleson, 2014; Novak, Fox, Car, & Space, 2016; Weisburd & Telep, 2014). However, there is support for “inverse displacement”, which means that once foot patrols are removed from an area, crime begins to increase again and trends towards similar levels as those in the control areas (Novak et al., 2016; Sorg et al., 2013; Weisburd & Telep, 2014).

Although some early studies find that foot patrols do not reduce crime (e.g. Bowers and Hirsch, 1987; Esbensen & Taylor, 1984; Kelling et al., 1982), there are more recent findings to support that foot patrol presence lowers crime rates (e.g., Andresen & Lau, 2014; Braga & Schnell

2013²; Novak et al., 2016; Hornick, Burrows, Phillips, & Leighton, 1991; Piza & O’Hara, 2014; Ratcliffe et al., 2011; Trojanowitz, 1982). However, the types of crimes reduced vary among the studies; some studies find statistically significant reductions in all or most types of crimes (Trojanowitz, 1982), while other studies specify that violent crime (Braga & Schnell, 2013; Ratcliffe et al., 2011; Piza & O’Hara, 2014; Novak et al., 2016), public disorder crime (Esbensen, 1987), or calls-for-service and property crimes (Melenka, 2016; Andresen & Lau, 2014) are reduced by the presence of foot patrols.

Q2: Do foot patrols impact how the public perceives safety?

Public opinion polls indicate that there is a high demand for police foot patrols (Wakefield, 2007). According to Wakefield’s (2007) study, the public’s anticipated outcomes from foot patrol initiatives are “reassurance”, “enhancement”, and “responsiveness”. Foot patrols are expected to prevent crime and reduce the fear of crime, provide more services than mere presence within neighborhoods (e.g. community involvement), and should be able to respond to the various requirements of different social groups within the area. (Wakefield, 2007, p.348-350; Melenka, 2016).

Wakefield (2007) found that foot patrols most commonly meet the “reassurance” expectation. Findings from both the NFPS and the FFPS support this, revealing that residents felt safer with foot patrol presence and were more satisfied with the police (Kelling et al., 1981; Trojanowitz, 1982). Hornick et al. (1991) also found that citizens expressed greater satisfaction with foot patrols compared to motor patrols, stating that foot patrols were better at maintaining order, treating people with respect, preventing crime, and solving local problems. Aspects of

² This evaluation included officers that were policing hot spots on foot and by bike.

“reassurance” include “visibility, accessibility, familiarity, and improved local knowledge” (Kelling et al., 2007, p.350). Not surprisingly, the “reassurance” and “enhancement” outcomes are often connected. When foot patrols enhance their service by making door-to-door visits or delivering crime prevention advice (e.g. CPTED techniques), this reassures public safety. In Wakefield’s (2007) study, all of the foot patrol initiatives led to some aspect of “enhancement”. However, some initiatives were more effective than others. Foot patrols were less likely to meet the “responsiveness” expectation; although most officers were in contact with residents during their patrols, there were different levels of effort put towards responding to the community’s specific needs through strategies such as community meetings (Wakefield, 2007). For example, one foot patrol strategy had an initial community meeting before the implementation of foot patrols in order to understand the community’s expectations in advance.

Although there are significant differences among public perceptions of foot patrols and their abilities in engaging with the public, generally, they tend to have a positive effect on the reduction of crime. Officer’s place-based knowledge of their individual beats, “non-adversarial” policing tactics, and community-oriented approaches give them an exclusive understanding of trends and characteristics of the crimes (e.g. types, times, places, offenders), and people within their beats (Groff et al., 2013; Wood, Sorg, Ratcliffe, & Taylor, 2014).

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Appendix I: Methodology

This literature review was developed in 2016 for a study conducted by Dr. Ryan Broll from the University of Guelph, which investigated issues of crime, safety, and disorder in the downtown core of a medium-sized city.