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Foot Patrol

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Your discussion will be assisted by your understanding of how foot patrol was used in the past, how its use changed with the invention of the automobile, and how recent research findings are germane to future patrolling methods.

Introduction

Foot patrol is regaining popularity as a police tactic. In many American cities, community and neighborhood groups are pressuring reluctant police chiefs to reinstitute neighborhood foot patrols. In some cities, political leaders sense the popularity of foot patrol with citizens and endorse its increased use. In others, chiefs of police who believe in the value of foot patrol under certain circumstances are being innovative with foot patrol and other forms of community-based policing. Why is this happening? What is there about foot patrol that makes it so popular with citizens and political leaders? Beyond its popularity, is there evidence to suggest that foot patrol has promise as a tactic to deal with crime, disorder, and fear in modern American cities?

Early Uses of Foot Patrol

To answer these questions, some background information about the early uses of foot patrol is required. From their initiation in England and America during the 19th century, police organizations have positioned police officers in communities for the purpose of patrolling predesignated areas conspicuously. The presence of readily identifiable police officers was presumed to prevent crime and disorder and to reassure citizens that, if crime and disorder did occur, police would be available to help them. This positioning of police in communities has been called patrol. Although some horse patrols were used prior to the adoption of automobiles, "patrol" has for the most part referred to foot patrol.

Foot patrol officers were assigned designated areas—"beats"—and they patrolled the streets and alleys of those beats. Accounts of early policing suggest that police officers were largely involved in maintaining order and were especially charged with disciplining children and youth. Patrol officers also were expected to enforce regulations against prostitution and illegal sale or consumption of liquor. Arrests for serious criminal acts were rare. To make an arrest, an officer often had to wait for his replacement and then wrestle the miscreants to district stations where they could be jailed. Later, after the introduction of the call box, officers would handcuff arrestees to the box and use it to call for a horse-drawn "paddy wagon" to transport the arrestee to jail. For the most part, however, police officers were independent agents spatially separated from supervisors and managers, walking their beats, informally settling disputes, maintaining order, and enforcing regulations.

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Foot Patrol Strengths

Policing in such a manner had strengths. Because police regularly patrolled relatively small areas, they became familiar with them and their citizens. Police knew both the good people and the troublemakers, as well as what local citizens expected of them. They were familiar with local political leaders (they might even have been appointed by the politicians to the police department or beat) and were in a position to inform leaders of neighborhood problems. Police knew local merchants and the problems that, for example, youths presented when they "hung out" in front of particular stores. In many respects, policing in such an intimate manner made local police officers responsible to, and agents of, local neighborhoods and created the circumstances within which police could support community enforcement of local norms and values.

Foot Patrol Weaknesses

Traditional policing also had problems. Integration of police into neighborhoods isolated officers from other police. It was not hard for them to "coop"—to sleep or hide from their supervisors. Their sympathy with community norms and their ability to isolate themselves from the police organization led to other problems, including corruption and unequal enforcement. Both merchants and illegal liquor operators were in a position to pay police officers to "look the other way" when unpopular antiliquor laws were broken. Many communities did not want "outsiders" (ethnically different people) to come into their neighborhoods. Often sympathetic to such feelings, police (and gangs) provided the means by which such outsiders were kept out. Local politicians interested in maintaining themselves in office often recruited police assistance to extend their tenure.

Ultimately, the increased use of automobiles during the early 20th century began to change both criminal behavior and the shape of neighborhoods.

The Coming of the Automobile

Confronted with problems and the need to create a new professional police image during the 1920's and 1930's, police leaders quickly perceived the value of automobile patrol. The police car was first seen as a means of increasing routine foot patrol. An officer could patrol a beat, either drive or be driven to another area, and then patrol that beat. As one-way (and later two-way) radios became available, supervisors had a means of keeping in touch with police officers to supervise and control them, as well as to keep them informed about crime or disorder.

As time went on, automobiles and radios increasingly provided the answers to the problem of dealing with serious crime and to the need to improve management's supervision of police officers' activities. Theories of preventive patrol by automobile became more elaborate. By rapidly and unpredictably driving cars through city streets, police could create a feeling of police omnipresence—thereby reducing crime and fear. Fast cars and two-way radios reduced the time it took police to get to the scene of crimes, thereby creating the hope that police could arrive at crime scenes so quickly that they could catch criminals in action or in flight in the immediate vicinity—in either case with a "smoking gun" action.

Foot patrol was increasingly denigrated as a police tactic. Police departments that kept foot patrol—such as Boston's—were ridiculed by professional police organizations for being behind the times and were chastised for irresponsibly failing to provide modern police services. Foot patrol assignments were frequently used as disciplinary measures while officers who performed well were assigned to vehicular patrol.

In some ways, automobile patrol was considered successful. Reducing police officers' intimate contacts with citizens and neighborhoods helped police managers reduce corruption and provide more equitable policing. In addition, the *radio-dispatched* automobile sometimes helped police reach the scene of the crime faster and enabled police headquarters to reassign officers on short notice to neighborhoods where they were most needed.

In other ways, automobile patrol failed to realize police officials' high hopes. The reasons are complicated and impossible to discuss in detail here, but the complexity of criminal events, the behavior of criminals, and the responses of victims and witnesses all played a part.

Automobile patrol also created a sense of loss in communities. Many citizens claimed that police patrol by automobile never really provided the sense of security that foot patrol gave them. Gradually, during the 1970's, the demand for more police presence in neighborhoods and communities was translated into a demand for foot patrol. In Boston, foot patrol was so popular during the mid-1970's that it was promised by successful politicians. New Jersey passed the Safe and Clean Neighborhood Act, creating a unique program: State-funded local foot patrol. Many cities in other States began to develop programs (some quite limited) that selectively implemented foot patrols.

Research Findings

Given such efforts, what empirical evidence is available on the impact of foot patrol? During the late 1970's, experiments in foot patrol were conducted in Newark, New Jersey, and Flint, Michigan. The findings in the two studies were remarkably consistent:

- When foot patrol is added in neighborhoods, levels of fear decrease significantly.
- When foot patrol is withdrawn from neighborhoods, levels of fear increase significantly.
- Citizen satisfaction with police increases when foot patrol is added in neighborhoods.
- Police who patrol on foot have a greater appreciation for the values of neighborhood residents than police who patrol the same areas in automobiles.
- Police who patrol on foot have greater job satisfaction, less fear, and higher morale than officers who patrol in automobiles.

The Flint experiment yielded two additional important findings. First, in areas where there was aggressive foot patrol, calls for service via telephone were reduced by more than 40 percent. Second, there was a modest reduction in crime. (There were no changes in crime levels in Newark as a result of use of foot patrols.)

In sum, foot patrol has been shown to reduce citizen fear, increase citizen satisfaction, improve the attitudes of police officers, and improve the job satisfaction among police officers. In addition, foot patrol shows some potential for reducing calls for service via telephone and, although the findings are not strong, it has some crime reduction potential. The questions to be asked then are the following: What are the public policy implications of the political popularity of foot patrol and the empirical findings about its impact? Do these findings indicate that all cities should immediately return to the wholesale use of foot patrol?

Before these questions can be answered directly, the findings regarding fear reduction need to be discussed briefly.

Criminologists and persons concerned with public policy about crime were perplexed during the 1970's by the relationship between crime and fear of crime. There were many neighborhoods in which the levels of crime were modest but the level of citizen fear of crime was high; there were many other neighborhoods in which crime was high but fear levels low.

During the early 1980's, it was discovered that fear of crime was not primarily associated with crime, although that certainly was an important contributor to fear levels. Instead, fear was found to relate to disorder: gangs, disorderly persons, drunks, panhandlers, street prostitution, and other forms of behavior that were threatening but not necessarily criminal. These findings did not surprise citizens or police officials who had worked closely with citizen antierime groups. The antierime groups had been emphasizing problems of community disorder and trying to convince the police to do something about them for some time.

These insights helped analysts interpret the findings regarding the fear reduction impact of foot patrol. It was likely that fear was reduced both as a result of the felt presence of police and of their activities in maintaining order during patrol. Thus, to the extent that police define disorder and citizen fear as significant problems, foot patrol is an important police tactic. Moreover, according to the analysts, foot patrol also might have some antierime potential. It may keep minor disorders from escalating into more serious events; it may encourage citizens to take action on their own behalf; and it certainly positions patrol officers to receive and interpret information necessary to solve crimes.

What then is the significance of foot patrol? Should police departments in every city immediately abandon automobile patrol and install foot patrol as the primary tactic? Probably not. The public yearning for foot patrol and the empirical findings regarding its significance suggest that foot patrol is one more important police tactic. In a city like Boston, for example, where population density is very high, foot patrol could be used on a widespread basis. Many areas of New York and Philadelphia have a population density that makes them amenable to the use of foot patrol. In Chicago, Milwaukee, and many other cities, foot patrol would be valuable in some areas. Yet in a rambling city like Houston, relatively few areas lend themselves to foot patrol. Similarly, foot patrol may be more or less valuable during particular times of the day. Foot patrol may be very important in neighborhood shopping centers where merchants need help controlling students who pass through the area after school.

It has become apparent over the past few years that citizens desire a more intimate and pervasive police presence in their communities. Citizens, as individuals and in groups, want police to help them keep order and prevent crime as well as to have police take action on their own. This wisdom—that peaceful communities come about as the result of the social obligation of all citizens to each other and that the police's role is to support, and assist in, that expression of social obligation—is perhaps the most important conclusion to be gained from police research, not just research into foot patrol, but almost all of the research that has been conducted by police over the last 20 years.

References

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Discussion Questions

1. Do you believe citizens have an obligation to act themselves to keep order and prevent crime as well as having police act for them?

2. Have you had an opportunity to observe police on foot patrol? How effective do you think they are?

3. If we had more police on foot patrol, would we have more order and less crime?

4. If foot patrols do not actually reduce crime, should patrolling continue solely because it makes citizens feel safer?

5. If you were a police officer would you like foot patrol duty? Why?

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