Chicago Officers Have A New Way To Police The Streets: On Foot

Not everyone, however, is applauding the not-so-groundbreaking technique.

By Katie Rucke | September 12, 2013

In an effort to reduce crime on the streets of Chicago, the Chicago Police Department has expanded the use of foot patrols to 20 of the city's most dangerous neighborhoods.

The surge of on-foot officers in Chicago first began in March. Twenty rookie officers were stationed in “impact zones” on the South and West Sides of the city, where reportedly 20 percent of all violent crimes have occurred in the past three years.

Since the implementation of the foot patrols, the department has reported a decrease in the number of homicides and shootings. Officers also have seized more than 1,550 illegal firearms.

As of 2:30 p.m. on Sept. 11, 2013, there have been 299 homicides in Chicago this year, compared with 377 during the same time period in 2012. However, compared with the numbers from 2011, there has been a slight increase in the number of homicides this year.

Arthur Lurigio is a professor of psychology and criminal justice at Loyola University in Chicago. He said he
views an increase in foot patrols as positive. "Residents are more likely to talk to the police and provide them with information about crimes occurring or crimes in the making," Lurigio said, adding that the police presence not only makes people feel safer but increases the likelihood residents are out of their homes, visiting neighbors and local businesses, which he says also deters crime.

Howard Brookins, alderman of Chicago’s Ward 21, agrees with Lurigio that foot patrols will help lessen the city’s crime rate. "Some 40 years ago my father was a police officer and walked a beat," he said. "We’ve gone too much to the technology, too much to cars, horses and all-terrain vehicles and not enough to the old fashioned policing."

On-foot patrols are the oldest form of police patrol. The resurgence of this type of police work in troubled neighborhoods occurred in the early 2000s when the New York Police Department began having cops routinely walk through violent neighborhoods. The man behind the NYPD’s use of foot patrol is the same person behind Chicago’s “Operation Impact” — Garry McCarthy.

McCarthy, who is Superintendent of the CPD, said, “These officers are making a real difference, they’re working to stop crimes from happening, they’re making arrests when necessary and connecting with the community all at the same time.”

Talking to a local NBC affiliate, McCarthy claimed that the use of foot patrols in 20 targeted areas throughout the city has led to a reduction in shootings by 48 percent, murders by 45 percent and overall crime by 29 percent, which he says is twice as much as city-wide averages.

**Does it work?**

While McCarthy and Chicago’s Mayor Rahm Emanuel (D) boast the new foot patrol program, not everyone is convinced foot patrols really benefit a city.

In 2009, the Philadelphia Police Department and researchers from the Department of Criminal Justice and Temple University conducted an experiment on the effectiveness of on-foot police patrols.

In the group’s experiment, researchers identified the highest violent crime corners in Philadelphia by using data from 2006 to 2008. Police commanders then assigned 120 foot patrol areas around these highly violent areas. During a three-month period, the group reported that the foot patrols prevented 53 violent crimes and violent crime decreased overall by 23 percent.

The researchers reported that during the foot patrol experiment, drug-related incident detections increased by 15 percent, pedestrian stops increased by 64 percent, vehicle stops increased by 7 percent and arrests increased by 13 percent.

That study only examined the effects of foot patrols for a three-month time period. But a different group of researchers examined the long-term effects of having officers on foot and discovered that once foot patrols were removed from an area, crime levels returned to levels before experiment of foot patrol officers were introduced.

So while foot patrols may be an effective way to reduce crime, they do not necessarily work to prevent crime in the long term. They are seen, however, as a way to improve a police departments relationship with community members, as the officers are not only more visible, but are more likely to engage with community members on a regular basis.

In addition to building a relationship with officers, foot patrol experiments have found that citizens begin to see their communities as safer and better places to live, which the Police Foundation, an organization that researches policing strategies, said was “something no other police strategy has been able to do.”

**On foot and ready to stop-and-frisk**

While the Temple University study found that foot patrols helped reduce crime levels, another found that foot patrol officers techniques more often include stop-and-frisk policies, which may cause increased tension in some communities.

In Los Angeles, officers on foot patrols reported that after a few years patrolling the streets, they have increasingly been asked by residents and local businesses to remove panhandlers and homeless persons from the sidewalks.

Bryan Stow, co-director of the Los Angeles Community Action Network, which advocates for the
and low-income communities, said that she doesn’t understand how the police department can rely on foot patrol officers when the city has had to cut other parts of the budget due to the state of the economy.

"In terms of allocation of officers, I really don't understand this, especially in an era when finally the LAPD has seen some [budget] cuts, to continue to pour officers into Central because the business community says ‘right go up,’" Dennison said. "It’s questionable public policy."

Chicago police have also raised an issue about the cost of the foot patrols, especially since the city had to close 50 public schools last May, citing budget problems.

But others like Carol Schatz, president and CEO of the Central City Association, view the foot patrol as an investment in a city's success.

"There hasn't been an area in the entire county of Los Angeles that has not benefited from making Downtown come alive," said Schatz. "When people are sleeping on the streets... it affects our ability to attract investment and continue to make this Downtown thrive."

Another issue for some is which officers, exactly, carry out these foot patrols — rookies. In Chicago, officers who have just completed their mandatory 12 weeks of field training after graduating from the police academy are the ones walking the most violent streets of Chicago.

The Fraternal Order of Police, the union representing rank-and-file police officers, shared some concerns about the rookie officers' safety. Police watchdog groups have also expressed concern that those armed officers patrolling the city's most dangerous neighborhoods are the newest members of the CPD and were not given the opportunity to work with an experienced officer.

“They're just out there in their groups with radios and guns doing 12-hour shifts at straight time for a 60-hour week,” wrote one blogger. “Talk about taking advantage.”

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