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OFFICER FRIENDLY - CRIME FIGHTER

A Description and Evaluation of the Officer Friendly
Program in the Norfolk, Virginia, Public Schools

Can a police sponsored classroom intervention program effectively alter the attitudes of children so that the chances of their being victims of crime are reduced? Can such a program effect a better understanding of the relationships between citizen action and crime and law enforcement action and crime? The results of a one-year evaluation of a program in the Norfolk, Virginia, public schools by psychologists from Old Dominion University appear to provide a preliminary and significant yes.

Introduction

In July, 1975, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, in cooperation with the Police Foundation and police departments in four metropolitan areas of the U.S., began the "Crime Resistance Program". The basic aim of this program was to demonstrate to local authorities that much can be done within the constraints of present resources to increase citizen involvement in reducing the opportunity for crime.

The Norfolk Crime Resistance Unit had one goal -- to demonstrate what a citizen can do to protect self and property. In order to do this effectively, it was considered necessary for individuals to have a realistic understanding of the limits of police potential in a democratic society and a

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better understanding of their own potential against crime.

In two of the pilot areas, Norfolk, Virginia, and DeKalb County, Georgia, the Crime Resistance Program directed part of its effort toward school-based educational programs. The strategy in Norfolk included a significant upgrading and restructuring of a part-time program that was currently underway in several elementary schools -- the Officer Friendly Program.

The first phase of the program attempted to help students develop positive attitudes toward the police so that subsequent instruction would be acceptable and credible. Subsequent phases dealt with safety and crime resistance, i.e., citizen initiative in reducing criminal opportunity and citizen-police teamwork.

What follows is a brief overview of program rationale, a description of the program and an analysis of the evaluation.

Program Rationale

It has been established that attitudes about police and crime vary among cultural and age groups and that these attitudes change as a function of the experiences of the individual. Social scientists describe these differences in attitude that result from varying experiences as resulting from the "socialization process". An individual's attitude, i.e., his or her state of mind with regard to a particular

matter, is a primary result of this socialization process.

The family is the chief agent for this process in almost every culture. The family's impact is so great because in most cases the family is the young child's world, and he or she has nothing against which to compare the family's actions.

The ages of the child's parents and their personalities; the economic, educational and ethnic status of the family; the number of children in the family; and the child's position in relation to siblings -- all of these are factors that affect the child's socialization. Characteristics thus developed are known to be reflected in many dimensions of a child's social and intellectual behavior and have been found to endure over long periods of time.

Another important socializer is television. Children are exposed to a wide variety of television shows which often present scenes of violence and victimization. Assessments of the effects of extensive exposure to television violence and victimization suggest that individuals may become desensitized to crime and violence and be more prone to "accept" such activity.

The combination of television and family may also function to reënforce one another. Parents select programs which are least objectionable to their own attitudes and may verbally condone those depicted as similar to their own, while disparaging those which are different. Children in two different

families observing the same shows may thus develop different attitudes as a result.

Knowing that attitudes are acquired early in life, it is not unrealistic to believe that children can form attitudes based on their limited experience. This limited experience is usually derived from parents and siblings or from other, more impersonal sources, such as television. This is particularly true of attitudes about police officers. Parents may speak of officers as ticket-givers or, even worse, people "who take bad little children to jail". Television portrays police officers as "shoot-'em up" characters in situations that make it difficult for a child to identify with the proper role of a police officer.

Communities interested in attitudes being formed by their youth often choose to initiate programs in the schools which expose the child to aspects of life not experienced in the home, or at least not experienced in a positive manner. Such educational programs often go beyond the individual child to effect the adults in the community, particularly parents and teachers.

Once a community decides that an educational program for children is needed to deal with existing attitudes toward the police, the type of program implemented varies. It may be very complex, or it may be a very simple program designed for superficial coverage. Norfolk chose to address the issue

of youthful attitudes toward police with a comprehensive program designed to bridge cultural and age barriers between the police officer and the child, and to change behavior.

Program Description

The first Officer Friendly visits in the Norfolk public schools began in 1974 on a part-time basis. At that time, the officers making the visits were assigned to the Youth Division and were detailed one-half day each week to the school system. As a result, only a small portion of the school population was exposed to the program. Cooperation between the school and police was productive, but limited.

In the spring of 1976, through recommendations of the Norfolk Police/FBI Crime Resistance program, the Chief of Police decided to make the Officer Friendly program available to the schools on a full-time basis. This decision had the complete support of the Superintendent of Schools. Simultaneously, school administration and police department personnel met to plan a structured Officer Friendly program that would include crime resistance techniques and act as a viable teaching tool capable of fulfilling traditional school needs.

During the summer, two officers were selected as Officer Friendlies and became part of the planning committee. The planning committee set down goals and objectives, agreeing on three focal areas, police role awareness, personal safety and crime resistance and deciding that an evaluation was

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necessary in order to measure successes and failures of the program.

The program goals were:

1. To establish rapport between elementary school children and the uniformed officer.
2. To provide a realistic understanding of police work and the services police perform in society.
3. To create a positive attitude in children toward their own welfare and the welfare of others.
4. To provide children with an opportunity to develop an intelligent understanding of their rights, responsibilities and obligations as community members.

In order to meet these goals, the committee designed a program that consisted of three classroom visits by the Officer Friendly, a series of teacher initiated activities and for the second grade students, a prototype workbook entitled, "The Officer Friendly Crime Resistance Activity Book".

Lesson plans and audio-visuals were developed by the police officers with assistance from the committee and school personnel and development of the ^{ACTIVITY} ~~work~~ workbook and teacher initiated classroom activities. ^{WAS L} The Sears Roebuck Foundation funded a major portion of the cost incurred in developing the activity book by paying the salaries of five teachers for several days work and by funding the necessary

art work. All printing costs for the book were paid for by the foundation. The officers also began training in elementary education techniques and gave several "trial" presentations to summer school students. It was during this time also that the committee enlisted the aid of Dr. Derlega and Dr. Heinen from Old Dominion University to design a low cost evaluation of the Officer Friendly program. Program development was completed and the program was incorporated into the kindergarten through second grade curricula by the beginning of the 1976-1977 school year.

The program was divided into three phases which would parallel the three classroom visits by the officer. These visits were to be equally spaced as much as possible throughout the year.

During the officer's first visit to the classroom, he introduced himself, explained the various parts of his uniform, the reason for wearing it, his equipment and its purpose. He showed a series of slides that portrayed him in various off-duty activities, such as feeding a baby, watching television with his family, shaving and cutting the grass. Then he showed slides depicting various law enforcement persons on duty, including traffic officers, K-9, detectives, State police officers and dispatchers. This was followed by a discussion with the students and a visit to

the police car which was parked outside.

On the second visit, the officer stressed several types of safety -- pedestrian, bicycle, bus, home and neighborhood. The student was encouraged to be cautious around strangers and to learn to identify the "dangerous stranger". The student was taught to remember his or her name and address, to refuse medicine or pills from classmates or strangers, and to recognize potentially dangerous household items, such as firearms, medicine, matches and cleaning preparations. The student was also encouraged to intervene when a classmate or other peer was not exercising "caution" in such situations.

On the third visit, the student was introduced to the concept of "crime resistance". It was stressed that there are things that each individual could do to lessen the chance of becoming a victim of a crime, and that everyone had a responsibility to do what he or she could to prevent crime from happening. Slides were used to explain basic crime prevention in terms meaningful to the particular age group and covered such things as locking and registering bicycles, putting toys in safe places after play, reminding parents to lock doors and windows before going to bed or when away from home, being observant and cautious around strangers, and telling parents about suspicious things that happen. The student was also encouraged to discuss these ideas with family

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members so they in turn might benefit from the crime resistance strategies learned in school.

Following each visit by Officer Friendly, students participated in a variety of teacher initiated classroom activities designed to reinforce the ideas and concepts presented by the officer. Second grade students also completed a section of the Officer Friendly Crime Resistance Activity Book which had also been designed to parallel the officers' visits and reinforce the oresentation.

Evaluation of Program

The program was evaluated at the second grade level in order to examine the effectiveness of the activity book and the officers' visits. From the fifty-two Norfolk elementary schools, seven were randomly selected to provide the evaluation data. From each school, three second grade classes were used for the study. One class in each school used both the book and had the officers' visits (Group I). The second group of classes used only the activity book (Group II). The remaining class in each school (Group III) received no treatment; that is, they neither used the workbook nor received the officers' visits. These classes were also randomly selected and assigned.

Tests were made in all twenty-one classes prior to any visits or distribution of ^{THE ACTIVITY} booklets. These pretests involved two measures. First, the children were asked to draw a picture

of a police officer at work. When completed, they brought their pictures to the evaluator who asked them, "What does your picture show?" Their statements were recorded on their specific pictures. The second measure consisted of ten questions such as, "A police officer is nice. Yes or No." Five positive statements and five negative statements were used. These two measures were presented again as post-tests at the end of the school year after the officers had completed their visits to the Group I classes.

The pictures were blind rated by independent judges who did not know the purpose of this study. The ratings were made on two dimensions: enforcive versus facilitative and crime versus noncrime. The judges were instructed to rate each picture on whether it showed the officer in an enforcement or facilitating (helping) capacity and whether the picture involved a crime or not. Change scores were computed in an effort to compare the pictures drawn at the pretest and at the post-test. The questionnaires were also analyzed in this way, measuring the degree to which the children's answers changed from pretest to post-test.

Statistical analyses of the judges' ratings for the drawings were made. The analysis indicated that the children who were not involved in the program (Group III) tended to draw the same types of pictures they had at the beginning of the

school year, while those who were exposed to the program tended to draw policemen in less violent roles. Children who used only the activity book (Group II) or who had used both the book and had the officers' visits (Group I) were more likely now to draw pictures representing officers as helping victims of crime. Typical drawings included a patrolman helping a child whose bicycle had been stolen, or a patrolman interviewing a person whose apartment had been burglarized. There was no difference, however, between the pictures drawn by students visited by policemen and the pictures drawn by students who received only the workbook.

The impact of the Officer Friendly Program on the drawings was not identical for males and females. The improvement in children's attitudes occurred for the boys but not for the girls. The program's impact on males was greater than for females perhaps because girls don't identify police work as a female occupation or because there were no female officers visiting schools or pictured in the workbook.

The results so far suggest that the workbook presented to the children may have been mainly responsible for changes in the children's image of police as less violent. This conclusion is based on the finding that the pictures drawn by students visited by policemen and the pictures drawn by by students who received

only the workbook did not differ. However, another test result indicates that unique positive effects were associated with the Officer Friendly's visits.

This test involved an evaluation of the effects of the program on the children's behavior toward other uniformed police officers. Preliminary work indicated that many children are anxious and embarrassed to talk with a police officer. It was expected that the children in the program, particularly those who met Officer Friendly in the classroom, would be more comfortable interacting with another police officer. In order to test this, an evaluation was made based on how close the children would stand to an unfamiliar officer. Children in the evaluation were instructed that an officer standing in the hallway wanted to talk to them. Each child then proceeded alone down the hallway toward the officer. When the child stopped, the distance the child stood from the officer was measured. Data from this evaluation was analyzed in terms of the child's race and sex as well as the degree of the child's participation in the Officer Friendly Program, i.e., Group I, II or III.

Children who were visited by Officer Friendly (Group I) stood closer to the unfamiliar police officer than children who were either in the control group (Group III) or had access^{only} to the workbook (Group II). These results were found for both boys and

girls. These findings suggest that as a result of Officers' Friendly's visits to the classroom, children were more comfortable and relaxed interacting with an unfamiliar police officer.

The overall evaluation results indicate that the Norfolk Officer Friendly Program positively affects children's attitudes and behavior toward the police. Children did learn to see the police officer as a resource person in dealing with crime, and as someone to whom they could relate comfortably. These results are particularly interesting since the program had this significant impact in a rather short time.

As noted earlier, the children's positive change in attitudes toward the police occurred for males but not for females. The program worked equally well for both white and black children, but blacks maintained less favorable attitudes about police officers than did whites at the beginning and end of the program. Results from the verbal questionnaire administered to the children at the beginning and end of the school year was inconclusive. It may have been inappropriate to ask the second grade child verbal questions, since they did not seem able to process and respond to questions adequately.

SUMMARY

A person's attitude toward the police is a function of the social experiences of that individual. People do not uniformly view police officers in a positive way and many do not have a realistic understanding of police work and the limitations of the services they can perform in a democratic society. Negative attitudes toward police create barriers to communication and cooperation and may be a major factor in the failure of many citizens to report crime and assist in law enforcement investigations.

Many police departments today are engaged in programs to instruct citizens in how to protect themselves from crime, and to encourage more active cooperation between police and citizens. The extent to which these programs are or can be successful is generally unknown due to an absence of systematic program evaluation.

Yale University sociologist, Dr. Albert Reiss, Jr., has suggested that the negative attitudes some citizens have towards police are a major factor in their failure to report crimes and cooperate with investigations. He writes:
"Citizens may fear or dislike the police; they may have little confidence in their ability to handle criminal matters or in their willingness to regard citizen complaints as legitimate."¹

Much of law enforcement depends on citizens' willingness to mobilize the police when crimes occur either against themselves or others. A major advance in law enforcement can be made if citizens feel increased responsibility to call the police when crime occurs. Data suggests that police on prevention patrol can do very little in the way of crime prevention, but that the patrol can be very responsive to citizens' requests for assistance. Hence, programs which increase citizens' willingness to contact police in criminal matters can potentially have an important contribution in law enforcement. We would like to think that children who participate in programs similar to Officer Friendly will perceive that the police can be called upon when crime occurs, and will accept more responsibility for their own welfare and the welfare of others.

The public often views the police as solely responsible for crime prevention and law enforcement. Actually citizen initiative to assist the police and themselves plays a more important role in law enforcement. Law enforcement can be undermined by citizens' decisions not to report crimes to the police. Educational programs like Officer Friendly, by increasing the public's understanding of what the police can do for them, and what they can do for themselves, are a significant aspect of law enforcement.

The Officer Friendly Program operates presently in kindergarten through the third grade in the Norfolk School System. It would be interesting to test the same children in later years to see if the program's impact has lasting effects. The data suggests that similar community programs could be designed to encourage students' adoption of positive attitudes toward law enforcement in all school classrooms from kindergarten through 12th grade.

Footnote

¹Reiss, Jr., Albert J. The Police and the Public.
New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971, Page 68.

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