

Although it may be best to let police lead the way, housing authority employees and social service providers can provide valuable assistance in the process of identifying public housing crime problems and taking the necessary actions to solve them.

Problem-Oriented Policing Succeeds in Public Housing

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Public housing developments have a reputation as high crime areas, and numerous studies have proven this reputation to be well deserved. Rates of violent crime are generally higher in public housing sites than at other inner-city locations.¹ One study in New Jersey suggested a way to combat serious crime in public housing using problem-oriented policing. This approach seeks to combine the resources of police, housing authorities, and social service agencies in identifying specific problems at each location and taking targeted action to address those problems. The study shows that this approach can be effective, as long as the team maintains a high level of activity that is led by its law enforcement members.

Starting the Program

Six public housing sites in Jersey City, New Jersey, participated in the study. A problem-oriented policing team was assembled at each site, and a police lieutenant headed each team. Other team members were a site-based police officer from the police department's public housing unit, two community service officers, a civilian site manager, a social service liaison officer, and one or more tenant representatives.

The teams began the 1-year study by identifying the problem areas specific to their location. Most of the teams identified similar types of areas, including entrances, walkways, playgrounds, parking lots, and individual apartments, although each team's list was unique to its housing project. The teams ranked the areas on their lists to

establish priorities for taking action. Then, to varying degrees, the teams spent the remainder of the study period taking concrete actions targeted to the problems they identified.

As Actions Increase, Do Calls for Help Decrease?

The researchers counted the number of actions taken by the problem-oriented teams, such as obtaining and carrying out search warrants, making arrests, issuing notices to cease unlawful activities, and scheduling and holding eviction hearings. At three of the six sites, the number of actions taken was significantly larger than at the other three sites.

The researchers then compared the number of team actions with the number of calls made to police to report crimes and seek assistance. They expected that the larger the number of team actions, the fewer calls for police service there would be during the same time period.

The anticipated result held true at only two of the six sites, however. These two sites were among the three sites that had the largest number of team actions. The third site with a great deal of team activity showed no decline in calls for service. The next question, then, was what made the two successful sites different from the rest of the test sites?

Actions by Police More Effective

The answer, according to the researchers, was that police officers carried out most of the team actions at the two successful sites. These police actions included making arrests, enforcing warrants, conducting investigations, and maintaining general order and civility.

Specifically, at the successful sites, housing authority employees handled fewer actions

and social workers handled hardly any of the actions when compared to the other sites. Housing authority actions typically involved evicting residents, creating and enforcing policies, opening channels of communication with residents, and improving physical features. The social service actions—which involved such services as counseling for drug addiction and psychological problems, assisting with employment and education opportunities, working with youth to keep them in school, and providing messages against violence and teen pregnancy—tended to be noncoercive.

In addition, at the third site that also had a large number of team actions, housing authority employees conducted a higher number of the total actions. So police action appeared to make the difference. But why?

Is Police Coercion the Key?

The researchers acknowledge that the coercive authority of the police could be a key factor. But they suggest that the team approach, with police officers relying on and being supported by the other team members, was also important to the success seen at the two sites. For example, rather

than conducting random patrols on their own, officers turned to team members for important information on problem residents and potential informants.

Although it may be best, then, to let police lead the way, housing authority employees and social service providers can provide valuable assistance in the process of identifying public housing crime problems and taking the necessary actions to solve them. It is not just police action, but police-led action, that seems to be the formula for success.

For more information

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Notes

1. See, for example, Dunworth, Terence, and Aaron J. Saiger, *Drugs and Crime in Public Housing: A Three-City Analysis*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 1994 (NCJ 145329).