Introduction

When police talk about reporting to the community, the focus usually drifts into one of these areas:

- Legal considerations
- Sunshine laws
- CORI
- Freedom of Information Act
- Reporting liability
• CALEA criteria

These issues may be important, but they are a different presentation. Our focus here is not on things that we must report, or conversely things that we cannot report, but rather on things that we should report, even though we’re not compelled to do so.

There is rarely much overlap between what we must report and what we should want to report. The Cleary Act, for instance, requires police to report campus-area crime statistics to colleges and universities. It does not require us to provide truly useful analysis or qualitative information of those statistics. But if we want current and prospective students to make intelligent choices about safety and crime prevention, we should report that interpretive information.

There are plenty of reasons to supply information about problems and police problem-solving efforts to the public:

• **Prevention.** By providing quality information, you arm citizens and businesses with the tools they need to prevent victimization.

• **Reduce fear.** Crime statistics by themselves can generate fear among readers unfamiliar with definitions or who don’t know how to interpret the numbers. Better information can help a resident assess real risks of victimization.
• **Build confidence.** A police agency that extensively reports to the public shows that it is “on top” of crime and disorder issues and is working on them.

• **Solicit intelligence.** Through its problem reports, a police agency can ask the public for information or intelligence that will help solve problems.

• **Solicit perspective.** Residents and business owners may have a different interpretation of the causes and consequences of a problem.

• **Establish partnerships.** Providing quality information helps draw guardians, place managers, controllers, and other stakeholders to the table.

There are, of course, a few reasons to *withhold* information from the public:

• **When there’s a significant potential for misunderstanding.** It’s better to provide nothing than to provide raw statistics or maps with no interpretation or definitions.

• **When the information is incomplete,** such as problem information that hasn’t been fully analyzed.

• **When there’s the potential to screw up an investigation or intervention strategy.** “In response to the problem, we’ll be staking out the parking lot every Wednesday night for the next month” would not be a good idea to release.

• **To protect the privacy of victims and witnesses.** Withhold victim’s names, addresses, and other identifying information, of course.

• **When it’s illegal,** as in the case of juveniles’ names in many jurisdictions.

In general, however, when we fail to report quality information to the public, it’s not for any of these reasons. It’s because we don’t have it in the first place (e.g., the agency has no analysis capability) or we just haven’t taken the time and effort. Thus, we do report information, we often make the same mistakes over and over:

• **We start providing information and stop.** There are plenty of web sites with crime statistics through 2003 but that haven’t been updated in five years.

• **We provide only data or statistics.** Raw data and statistics don’t do much to help the public. What are citizens supposed to do with the knowledge that robberies are up 20% if they don’t know when, where, the nature of the robberies, the characteristics of the victims, and the weapons used? How should an online map viewer react to a cluster of burglaries near her house if she doesn’t know how they got in, what was stolen, or the relationship between the victim and the offenders?

• **We don’t provide anything actionable.** Related to the point above, our information often gives members of the public little or nothing to go on. If we’re expecting them to make intelligent safety and crime prevention choices, we have to give them the information necessary for such things.

• **We provide information only in limited formats.** Some citizens don’t have access to the Internet or don’t know where to look for the reports you’re posting. To truly reach the public,
we have to provide reports in numerous formats: web, mail, e-mail, presentations, television, newspapers, and so forth.

- **We treat them like children**, by providing the same tired crime prevention tips that any fool could figure out on his own.
- **We spin**, trying to turn bad information into good information or trying to take credit for crime decreases we’ve had nothing to do with.
- **We present hypotheses as facts**. We blame gangs or methamphetamines or homeless people or some other factor for everything without fully studying the problem.

**Effective Communication**

Crime analysis audiences are taught that their jobs are one part “analysis” and one part “communication.” Analysis transforms raw data into information, but only effective communication transforms information into knowledge—information that has been absorbed by its audience and is used in decision-making. The same model applies to information a police agency wants to release to the public. Only effective communication will lead them to receive and internalize the information and make sensible decisions based on it. This presentation is about the communication aspect; please use the resources of the International Association of Crime Analysts (www.iaca.net) for help with the “analysis” part of the process.

The first step towards effective communication involves understanding the difference between “pull” media and “push” media.

“Pull” media is media that the audience actively seeks, or is pulled towards. Those that issue this type of media rarely have to hunt for their intended audience; they have millions of people who are clamoring for the information every day. Examples of this type of media include celebrity news, sports scores, sensational crime cases, headlines, stock quotes, and movie reviews.
With “push” media, most the audience is indifferent or hostile and must be convinced or pushed to read it. Even though some of it is for the intended reader’s own good, they must be convinced to spend time with it. Examples of push media include nutritional information, endangered species lists, amber alerts, the current national debt, and social or political information.

In policing, we deal with both types of media, but “pull” media in policing is usually stuff that doesn’t particularly do the audience any good. It includes information about murders (particularly sensational ones), high-profile crimes, bizarre crimes, and police scandals.

Most of what we want the audience to read in policing—pattern information, problem information, prevention information—is “push” media. Most of them aren’t actively seeking it. We need to lead them to it.

With any type of media, there is always some audience “pulled,” but it isn’t necessarily the audience we want. As an example, imagine that your agency has a problem with something like thefts of laptop computers. You decide to hold a public meeting and you widely disseminate the date and time of the meeting. Who comes?
If your agency is like most, the audience naturally “pulled” to the meeting will be composed of bored, annoying, or crazy people who will show up to anything just to hear themselves talk. Your core audience—the ones that really need the problem information—such as potential victims, handlers, place managers, guardians, and other people who can influence the problem—will probably stay home unless specifically targeted and convinced to attend.

There are few ways we can “push” our target audience and engage them with the information.

- **Make it interesting to read.** Thousands of people around the world know detailed information about crime and disorder in Lincoln, Nebraska, because they are dedicated readers of Chief Tom Casady’s blog, “The Chief’s Corner” ([http://lpd304.blogspot.com](http://lpd304.blogspot.com)). By writing well, clearly explaining problems, and offering a healthy dose of wit, Tom makes crime and disorder information fun and interesting to review. He has made “pull” media out of information that would normally be “push.”

- **Make it easy to receive.** If audiences won’t proactively seek out the crime information you want them to have, at least make sure they can receive it easily. Most of your residents don’t want to check your web site every day, so disseminate your crime information by e-mail, and mail it in flyers, and convince the newspaper to publish it.

- **Put it in their path.** The best way to “make it easy to receive” is to find ways to disseminate information in such a way that your intended audience literally can’t miss it. For instance, when we wanted to alert potential victims to a problem of GPS thefts in Danvers, Massachusetts, we designed flyers to be posted by businesses, where potential victims would encounter the information at the very moment they were making the decision to leave their GPS unsecured.

- **Highlight the danger to the audience members or their loved ones.** A report on bicycle theft around M.I.T. in Cambridge, Massachusetts starts off, powerfully, “If you own a bicycle that cost you $200 or more, live in Cambridge or Boston, and you do little to protect it, it will be stolen within a couple of years” ([http://web.mit.edu/~joncox/www/bikesafety.html](http://web.mit.edu/~joncox/www/bikesafety.html)). A report on neighborhood problems in Pinellas County, Florida starts by encouraging readers to “imagine your elderly grandmother looking forward to lunch every day with friends in the neighborhood,” and subsequently menaced by drug dealers and gun-wielders.

- **Find a spokesperson**—someone known and respected by the community who will draw attention when they speak or write about your issue. This might be a popular newspaper columnist, a community organizer, a public official, or a business leader.
In terms of the information itself, there are several content considerations to keep in mind:

- **Write powerfully.** Draft the best writer in the police department to write the text. Do not overestimate the power of good writing to motivate people to action, and do not underestimate the power of bad writing to make people stop reading after the first paragraph. Also, do not underestimate the power of The Force.

- **Define terms.** Use vernacular language (“vandalism” instead of “malicious mischief,” “rape” instead of “aggravated sexual assault”) and even then, define your terms. Most audiences don’t know the difference between a robbery and a burglary.

- **Provide a feedback mechanism.** Remember, part of the reason for providing the information is to solicit feedback and intelligence. Make sure readers have a contact name, number, and e-mail address (or, online, a feedback form or message board) that will allow them to write to you with their own perspectives and information.

- **Analyze rather than guess.** A good public report is based on thorough analysis, not untested hypotheses.

- **Tell them how to use the information.** Suggest specific courses of action they can take based on the information you have provided.

- **Be careful of overpromising.** Don’t announce strategies you can’t implement or promise solutions you can’t deliver on. The example below comes from an annual report I wrote in 2006. Although I think the language is good, I went too far in promising a major private-public sector collaborative to help people with a host of social problems.

- **Report failure along with success.** Frankly admitting when your agency’s strategies didn’t work builds confidence in the truthfulness of your whole report. Plus, it’s the right thing to do.
It is also important to **disseminate in multiple formats**. Again, don’t assume that your audience has access to the web or e-mail, or reads the local newspaper. Think of ways to reach your specific audience. When we wanted to alert the community to questionable magazine salespeople in 2008, not only did we publish information in our *Annual Report* and in a web alert, but we also convinced the newspaper to run a story and presented on the problem during our monthly television show.
Examples

With those considerations in mind, here are four examples of public information that illustrate various aspects done well.

1. Cambridge, MA Annual Crime Report:

I started my career in Cambridge and learned how to create an Annual Report in that unit. This 150-page monster is stuffed full of qualitative crime information, including an executive summary, detailed analysis of major crimes, analysis of each neighborhood and business district, special reports on juvenile, domestic, and other crimes, and crime prevention tips. The Cambridge Annual Report perfectly marries the quantitative with the qualitative, never presenting statistics alone but always thoroughly interpreting them.

2. Community Safety Plan for West Dorset (UK):
   http://www.dorsetforyou.com/media/pdf/c/2/West_Dorset_CSP1_Final.pdf

What I love about this report is the catchy formatting. Either they have a talented person on staff, or they hired a desktop publisher to create the report. Either way, its colorful graphics and layout make it fun and interesting to read.


What I find fascinating about this report is its organization. Rather than structuring itself around major crime categories, like most annual reports do, instead it announces the main police goals at the beginning and organizes the rest of the report around how well the agency met the goals. It’s a very unique way to write an annual report and shows a focus on assessment in addition to analysis.
4. Port Washington, WI “Problem-Oriented Policing Initiatives” Page
http://www.pwpd.org/sp_pop.htm

I found out about this one at the POP conference. The PWPD has provided a very accessible format for citizens to read their officers’ initiatives. The various initiatives show that the police are concerned with a broad range of problems, have problem-solving skills, and care about the community’s concerns. None of the “reports” are more than a paragraph long, providing a quick abstract of the problem and what the agency did about it.

<table>
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<th>EMPLOYEE</th>
<th>LOCATION</th>
<th>DATE STARTED</th>
<th>POP PROJECT</th>
<th>STAGE OF COMPLETION</th>
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<tr>
<td>Officer Kirsten Moertl</td>
<td>Fisherman’s Park, North Slip and North Beach</td>
<td>09/26/06</td>
<td>Open intoxicants, littering and fish entrails. Click here for more info.</td>
<td>Completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Officer Craig Czarniecki</td>
<td>800 block of Algoma Blvd.</td>
<td>02/01/06</td>
<td>Speeding. Click here for more info.</td>
<td>Completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dispatchers Tammy Shepherd Bocki Hill</td>
<td>Port Washington Police Department</td>
<td>03/08/06</td>
<td>Tax Refund Intercept Program. Click here for more info.</td>
<td>Completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Officer Matt Keller</td>
<td>N. Wisconsin St., north of Main St.</td>
<td>05/04/06</td>
<td>Drivers crossing into on-coming traffic to mail items in mailbox. Click here for more info.</td>
<td>Completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Officer Tom Schleg</td>
<td>Highway LL, north of Willow Dr.</td>
<td>05/07/06</td>
<td>Add “No Passing On Shoulders” sign on Highway LL. Click here for more info.</td>
<td>Completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Officer Eric Schmeing</td>
<td>Throughout City</td>
<td>09/19/06</td>
<td>Step signs and corresponding ordinance. Click here for more info.</td>
<td>Completed</td>
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</table>

Finally, my own Annual Crime Report for 2007 can be found at:


I try to focus on problems and prevention throughout the report, merging qualitative data with quantitative statistics. I hope it gives you a few ideas for your own public reports.
Thank You!

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http://www.iaca.net