

COON CREEK CANOE RACE

POLICE PROBLEM SOLVING FOR A CIVIL DISTURBANCE

LA CROSSE POLICE DEPARTMENT, WISCONSIN, 1994

- THE PROBLEM:** La Crosse was the host to a canoe race, which attracted large crowds and college students from all over the country. In recent years, the crowds have grown larger and more unruly. In 1989, an unknown person fired gunshots. In 1990, police officers were assaulted and a squad car was damaged. Many arrests were made and the chaos continued to escalate through 1992.
- ANALYSIS:** The police analyzed the sequence of events leading up to the disturbances. At the tavern closing time, persons lawfully occupying downtown taverns would converge with persons on the sidewalks and overflow into the streets, obstructing traffic, which, in turn, required a police response. Vehicles were damaged and individuals were injured. The traditional police response included arrests and crowd and traffic control. The large numbers of people contributed to a crowd mentality and feeling of anonymity.
- RESPONSE:** The police created a positive image of the event and tried to instill positive attitudes in the individuals participating in the events following the canoe races by using the local media, businesses, and public agencies. Police video cameras were employed to reduce the anonymity the large crowds provided in the past.
- ASSESSMENT:** The numbers of arrests were reduced from 183 in 1991 and 149 in 1992, to 14 total arrests in 1994. The public's perception of the police's ability to handle the event increased.
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INTRODUCTION

The City of La Crosse, Wisconsin, is the sixth largest City in the State. It has a permanent population of 51,300 and is home to the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. The City's population increases by approximately 15,000 each year as students of University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, Viterbo College, and Western Wisconsin Technical College attend classes. The City is served by an 110-member metropolitan police force.

During the mid 1980s, the Village of Coon Valley, population 500, located only minutes from La

Crosse; began hosting a spring canoe race. The annual event began to attract large numbers of students, not only from the La Crosse area, but from across the country. Following the canoe races, large crowds gathered in the downtown area of the City of La Crosse.

In 1989, the crowds became unruly and an unknown individual fired gunshots. The crowd became confrontational and had to be cleared from the streets by fire trucks spraying water into the crowd.

In 1990, the crowds once again became confrontational, with one individual leaping onto the

hood of a squad car. Crowd members broke cement garbage containers along the street and threw chunks of concrete at Police Officers. One squad car had its tires slashed. Four officers were injured before the crowd was dispersed, once again by fire trucks spraying water onto the crowd.

The year 1991 brought even more confrontation following the annual canoe race. One officer was hit by a garbage can thrown at him from the crowd. Crowd members surrounded a vacant squad car, turned it on its roof, and set it afire. Following early morning tavern closing hours, 183 individuals were arrested and the use of large amounts of tear gas was necessary to disperse the unruly and confrontational mob.

In 1992, the La Crosse Police Department was once again confronted with an unruly crowd which was subsequently dispersed through the use of tear gas and lines of officers equipped with riot gear. A total of 149 individuals were arrested by members of the La Crosse Police Department, supported by the Wisconsin State Patrol and additional officers from surrounding jurisdictions.

The events following the canoe races, beginning in 1989 and through 1992, were of great concern to the Police Department and to the entire community of the City of La Crosse. The events were attracting national media attention and eroding the relationship between the Police and the universities.

In 1993, the La Crosse Police Department established a Problem Solving Team consisting of one Lieutenant, four Sergeants and four Police Officers. The team set about its task by following a simple 4-step problem solving process, which was developed by Professor Herman Goldstein at the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

The following discussion pertains to the Problem Solving Team's analysis and recommended response to the underlying causes of problems contributing to the annual civil disturbance and the Police Department's relationship to the community and its universities.

SCANNING

The Problem Solving Team began a broad search for information that extended beyond traditional police sources in an effort to discover and identify the underlying causes for disruption following the canoe races. The scanning included meetings with the local area colleges and a speak-out held at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.

The speak-out involved the Chief of Police, members of the Problem Solving Team, members of the Tavern League, and members of the student body serving on a panel before the general student population. The Problem Solving Team, hereafter referred to as POP Team, utilized a University of Wisconsin-La Crosse student survey.

The POP Team attended meetings of the area Tavern League, Businessmen's Association, and interviewed persons who had attended the events following the canoe races and who had been arrested at the canoe races. The

POP Team reviewed media coverage of previous events, reviewed police reports and interviewed line officers that actually participated in policing these events. The scanning step lasted several months and involved an intense and in-depth review of all possible information sources in an effort to develop a better understanding of the problem.

ANALYSIS

The analysis step was seen as critical to the POP Team since it would, by and large, determine the Team's recommended response. The Team analyzed the various actors including first, second and third parties, their actions and the subsequent responses or reactions that were contributing to the civil disturbances.

The actors in this situation were, in fact, not all college students. They were generally of college age but were coming from surrounding areas to attend and often to participate in the disturbances. The Team identified the actors to include the police, students and non-students, bystanders, businesses, hotel/motel owners, vendors, the Coon Creek Planning Committee, elected officials, the prosecutor, the various college administrators, and the media as playing a role in this event.

The Team discovered that at tavern closing time, persons lawfully occupying downtown taverns in La Crosse would attempt to converge with persons already crowding the sidewalks. The two groups would overflow into the streets, obstructing traffic, which, in turn, required a police response.

Vehicles parked along the curb line were frequently damaged and individuals were injured when emerging from between parked cars. The traditional police response included arrests and attempts to keep the crowd under control and out of traffic.

The large numbers of young people present contributed to a crowd mentality and feeling of anonymity. The media presence seemed to generate even more outwardly hostile behavior by members of the crowd. Tavern owners showed movies of previous confrontational years prior to tavern closing and served alcohol in glass bottles and cans.

The Problem Solving Team analyzed the sequence of events, taking into consideration the physical settings and social context of such events. Having gathered as much information as possible and after having developed a better understanding of the relationship between the various actors, their actions and subsequent reactions, the Team set about the task of developing a response.

RESPONSE

The Team determined that the response should be designed to go beyond obvious incidents and address the underlying problems. The strategy would provide a long-lasting solution to the problem and provide a substantial improvement for the community. The strategy would also be aimed at reducing the police workload by reducing the problem.

The goal of the P.O.P. Team was to reduce confrontation and improve the community's perception of the handling of the events following the annual canoe race. The Team developed a multifaceted response as follows:

1. The Team sought the assistance of the local college newspapers and the community

television, newspaper and radio networks. Letters were sent to all area media encouraging a partnership effort to develop a positive image and to reduce confrontation at the 1993 event. Team members appeared on talk shows and were interviewed by various media.

2. The Team met with the area Tavern League and was able to arrange for free transportation for individuals desiring to leave the City of La Crosse after the event. A bus was provided by the Tavern League to provide the transportation to community members at no expense.
3. The Team arranged for an alternative non-alcoholic dance to be held on the University of Wisconsin campus. The dance was attended by many individuals and reduced the number of underage persons in the downtown area.
4. The Team arranged for ten video cameras to be used by a newly created La Crosse Police video photo unit. The videos were advertised as a watchful eye to provide for a safe environment and were well received by the community and by the young people attending the canoe race events. The video cameras were used where arrests had been used in the past. The cameras reduced the need for confrontation and resulted in orderly behavior.
5. The Team developed a partnership with the local area Heileman Brewing Company. The brewery provided thousands of positive image pins, which proclaimed "Fun at the Creek—Safe on the Street." The pins were distributed by officers policing the event and were very well received and worked well in developing a positive relationship between the police and canoe race followers.
6. The Team, working with the student body, developed a positive image brochure which was produced and printed by Heileman Brewing Company at no cost and was subsequently distributed throughout the

various universities and at the canoe registration sites.

7. POP Team members met with members of the Department of Public Works and arranged for a special clean-up of the downtown area prior to the canoe race events in an effort to remove bottles and other items, which could cause injury or harm. The Team members went door to door in the downtown area, encouraging tavern owners to serve alcohol only in plastic cups.
8. The POP Team members met with members of the Common Council and arranged for a Resolution, which would prohibit parking in the downtown area between 9:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. on the nights following the canoe races. The no parking restrictions resulted in no damage to vehicles and no need for the traditional response required to protect such parked vehicles.
9. The POP Team sought permission from local officials to close several streets in the downtown area in order to provide a safe environment for individuals and crowds too large to safely occupy the sidewalks. The subsequent barricading resulted in a safe and controlled environment, which led to an upbeat and festival-like event.

The underlying theme of the POP Team's response was to develop a positive image and a positive attitude on the part of all individuals participating in the events following the canoe races.

ASSESSMENT

The P.O.P. Team set about a long-range solution to a serious and on-going community problem. The recommended response was applied in May of 1993 and again in May of 1994.

Heavy emphasis was placed on communicating with the public including educating them as to the seriousness of the problem, warning potential victims about their vulnerability, and warning potential offenders that their behavior would be monitored. As part of its assessment, the Team recognized the need to develop measures of effectiveness.

The Team concluded that the absence or reduction in the number of arrests would be an indicator of success. The Team further felt the crowd dispersing on its own and not requiring police dispersal would be an additional sign of success. Finally, the Team felt that the community's perception of the handling of the event could be determined by monitoring subsequent media coverage and by establishing a liaison within the universities.

Following the 1994 canoe race events, the Team concluded that its response was, indeed, successful. The numbers of arrests were reduced from 183 in 1991 and 149 in 1992, to 14 total arrests in 1994.

The subsequent deluge of positive media articles and reports, along with letters from citizens and Letters to the Editor, led the Team to conclude that citizen perception of the handling of the event had, indeed, been greatly improved. The Team's response has led to a permanent University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Police Liaison position with one officer assigned with a desk in the student union building. The number of officers required to police this annual event has been greatly reduced and the on-going relationship with local area universities greatly enhanced.

This and other successful problem solving efforts by the City of La Crosse Police Department has resulted in problem solving teams assigned to each shift and each major bureau of the La Crosse Police Department. Problem solving has evolved as the corporate strategy of the City of La Crosse Police Department and has resulted in a new organizational chart, which clearly depicts an institutionalized participative management style.