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Bank Robbery: A Target for Community Policing  
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Through a crime awareness course, the Suffolk County Police Department takes an active role in helping financial institutions protect themselves.

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As its name implies, community policing involves citizens and the police working together to help resolve community crime problems. During the past decade, the community policing approach has helped law enforcement agencies throughout the United States reestablish bonds with the communities they serve. However, many police departments that have embraced community policing may have unintentionally excluded investigative units from participating in this program. Perhaps this stems from a perception among investigators that community policing offers them no benefits. But such thinking may serve only to deprive investigative units from experiencing the rewards of community policing.

In Suffolk County, New York, investigators developed and implemented an innovative community policing program that provides the employees of financial institutions with formal crime awareness training. The approach has proven so successful and popular that variations of the original program have been developed to assist other potential crime victims.

## Historical Perspective

From 1984 through 1989, detectives from the Suffolk County Police Department's Robbery Section noticed several recurring problems while investigating bank robberies. They learned that in the wake of a robbery, bank employees often:

Failed to notify police promptly and accurately    Failed to safeguard the crime scene prior to the arrival of

    police personnel

Had not activated surveillance cameras

Were unable to provide detailed, accurate descriptions of suspects

Exhibited a reluctance to assist in the robbery investigation

Experienced great anxiety regarding their required participation in court proceedings.

Collectively, these problems represented a serious impediment to the successful investigation of bank robberies.

Detectives also noted a steady increase in the number of bank robberies occurring throughout the country and the region. In the New York metropolitan area, an alarming number of these robberies resulted in customers or bank employees sustaining physical injury.

The Suffolk County Police Department decided to develop and implement a plan that would reduce the possibility of injuries occurring during the commission of bank robberies. The plan also would address the reactions of bank employees that impeded investigations. After analyzing the various investigative difficulties and safety problems relating to bank robberies, detectives from the Robbery Section concluded that formal training conducted by police personnel and directed toward bank employees at all levels, from tellers to managers, would help

alleviate these problems.

## Program Design and Implementation

Throughout 1989, detectives contacted hundreds of financial institutions and law enforcement agencies throughout the United States to determine what, if any, training they provided for bank employees. The detectives found that while many law enforcement agencies and financial institutions conducted some type of formal training, none conducted a comprehensive program addressing customer and employee safety, as well as investigative problems. These surveys also revealed that in addition to safety issues, the prime concerns of bank executives focused on adherence to strict policies developed by the various financial institutions. Late in 1989, the detectives began to develop a training program that would address the bank executives' concerns and the factors that inhibited robbery investigations. Suffolk County detectives solicited input from financial institutions in the area regarding their safety and policy needs. The detectives then outlined a one-day seminar to address these issues. Representatives from the police department and several financial institutions discussed and modified the outline at a number of meetings.

Meanwhile, the police department attempted to locate training aids to accent various portions of the emerging program. Finding very little training material available, the detectives decided to design and develop their own training aids, which eventually included video and audio tapes, posters, slides, and printed pamphlets emphasizing the important points that would be discussed during the training seminar.

## The Financial Institution Crime Awareness Course

In January 1990, detectives finalized the formal plan for the one-day training seminar. The first Financial Institution Crime Awareness Course was held at the Suffolk County Police Department Training Academy in May 1990.

Program planners knew that the bank employees' acceptance of the instruction program depended largely on the credentials of, and

quality of the presentations by, the instructors. Therefore, the planners hand selected department experts in robbery investigation, physical evidence, patrol procedures, basic crime prevention, court preparation and presentation, and stress counseling to present the different segments of instruction.

## Course Description

The course consists of seven, one-hour blocks of instruction. In the first hour, entitled "Everyday Conduct," the instructor encourages employees to obey current bank policy and follow Suffolk County Police Department recommendations regarding safe and proper opening and closing procedures. The instructor also reinforces the goal of bank robbery prevention, explains the concept of "target hardening," tests employees' powers of observation and explains methods to increase these skills, and educates students on basic crime prevention techniques that are currently in use in other programs.

The second hour of instruction, "Conduct During a Robbery," concentrates on employee adherence to current bank policy and police department recommendations regarding conduct during a robbery, with an emphasis on employee and customer safety. During this hour, the instructor lectures on methods to reduce the possibility of violence and additional ways to enhance employees' powers of observation. The trainer also explains how to increase the possibility of arresting and convicting offenders, while strongly discouraging any "heroic" or "grandstanding" actions on the part of employees, which may create a dangerous situation. Instead, the instructor presents nationally recognized crime prevention techniques enhanced by the experiences of detectives investigating robberies in the Suffolk County area.

In the third block, entitled "Conduct Immediately After a Robbery," the instructor explains techniques to reduce the possibility of injury due to violence or emotional trauma, such as heart attacks, strokes, and other disorders. Also covered during this hour are basic safety measures and how to deal with physical and emotional injuries immediately after a robbery. Emphasis is placed on specific tasks that should be accomplished by employees, such as activating silent alarms and surveillance cameras, notifying the police department via telephone, locking

the doors to the bank, etc. The instructor then demonstrates how employee conduct can assist police during the critical time period immediately after a robbery and shows attendees the proper way to identify and secure physical evidence.

The fourth hour of instruction, presented by a patrol officer, is entitled "The Role of the Uniformed Police Officer." In this hour, participants learn more about the police department's response policies. The officer stresses the police department's concern for employee and customer safety, explains police response procedures, and gives reasons for certain police actions at the crime scene, such as treating the physically injured and emotionally traumatized, identifying witnesses, conducting preliminary questioning, etc. The officer emphasizes safety and crime prevention, as well as crime scene security, and explores the possibility of hostage takings and pursuit situations.

During the fifth hour, "The Role of the Detective," a police detective explains the need for certain procedures performed by detectives at the crime scene, such as conducting interviews, taking written statements, photographing and collecting evidence, searching for latent fingerprints, obtaining inked elimination prints, etc. The detective also explains to seminar participants the reasons for the various requests that detectives make of witnesses during the follow-up investigation, such as viewing mug photos, assisting in the preparation of composite sketch drawings, identifying possible subjects from photospreads, and viewing lineups. Most important, though, the detective stresses the importance of witness cooperation to investigations.

"The Court Process" covers each phase of the judicial process in which a victim or witness may become involved. During this hour, the instructor talks about the importance of honestly presenting facts to the district attorney and grand jury and addresses the role of the district attorney, judge, jurors, defense attorney, defendant(s), victims, witnesses, police officers, and detectives in each phase of the court process. The instructor then tells participants how evidence, such as witness statements or positive lineup identifications, will be used in court.

A police stress counselor presents the final hour of instruction, entitled "Post-Robbery Trauma." At this time, the counselor defines Critical Incident Stress Syndrome and discusses its causes and effects. The counselor tells participants how to

identify the symptoms, informs them of recognized methods for dealing with this health hazard, such as counseling, gives them information about emotional trauma, and offers referral options.

## Program Evaluation

Since May 1990, the police department has conducted over 70 training sessions for more than 7,000 bank employees from the Long Island, New York, metropolitan area. Each participant who completes the seminar receives a certificate. Attendees also complete evaluations of the seminar, which instructors and program managers use to make changes in the structure and content of the course.

In an effort to measure the long-term success of the program, the police department monitored the number of bank robberies, arrests, and convictions in the region. Despite a steady rise in bank robberies nationwide, the number of bank robberies in the Long Island metropolitan area has leveled off since the inception of the training program. In recent history, Suffolk County experienced 30 to 50 bank robberies per year. Only 12 financial institutions in the county were robbed in 1995. The conviction rate for robberies that do occur continues to increase.

It is generally difficult to cite tangible results, such as statistics, to prove the effectiveness of a crime prevention program because most criminals do not indicate what crime prevention techniques discouraged them from committing a crime. However, one indication of success, particularly for a training program of this type, would be an increase in reports of suspicious persons, vehicles, or circumstances relating to a target. Since the inception of the training program, the Robbery Section of the Suffolk County Police Department has recorded a dramatic increase in such reports from financial institutions. The police department also has received testimonial letters from bank employees who attended the seminar and subsequently became victims of bank robberies. The employees reported that they felt less anxiety during the robberies and also felt confident performing the tasks necessary to assist the police in the identification and apprehension of suspects.

Investigators verify that the information given by employees who have completed the training program is more detailed and given in

a more timely manner than information received from employees who have not attended the class. As a result, robbery detectives have made several immediate apprehensions based on information supplied by bank employees using the techniques they learned in the program. In addition, most employees who receive the training do not hesitate to testify at criminal proceedings. Further, since the inception of this training program, no customer or employee has sustained physical injury during the commission of a bank robbery in Suffolk County.

### Expanding the Program

As the success of the Financial Institution Crime Awareness Course became known to other law enforcement agencies in the New York metropolitan area and beyond, the Suffolk County Police Department began receiving numerous requests to provide training to police personnel from other agencies interested in adopting a similar program. To date, the Suffolk County Police Department has trained more than 300 law enforcement officers from more than 100 law enforcement agencies in 6 states, as well as security personnel from retail department stores, supermarkets, and private corporations.

The Suffolk County Police Department also has modified the course curriculum for use in robbery prevention programs targeting other community businesses. Thus far, department personnel have provided crime awareness training to employees of fast-food and family restaurants and convenience stores, as well as to senior citizen groups.

Today, more than 6 years after the inception of the program, financial institutions throughout the New York metropolitan area eagerly participate in the training seminars. So that as many citizens as possible can benefit, the department provides the training to financial institutions, as well as to other groups, at no cost.

### Conclusion

The Financial Institution Crime Awareness Course provides a

tangible way for the Suffolk County Police Department to demonstrate its concern for the safety of community residents. The program also strengthens the department's relationship with the community and promotes citizen participation in the criminal justice process.

Likewise, the training benefits the police department--especially robbery investigators--by preparing potential victims and witnesses to react properly in a crisis situation. This training not only teaches bank employees, and others, the proper procedures to follow during and after a robbery, but it also increases the likelihood that they will participate in the prosecution of the offenders.

Community policing offers opportunities for law enforcement agencies to explore innovative approaches to crime prevention. Through the Financial Institution Crime Awareness Course, the Suffolk County Police Department takes an active role in helping the community protect itself.