

Toronto's Public Order Unit

Officers use preventive tactics to maintain orderly crowd behavior

BY ALAN HARMAN

A change in emphasis from reactive to pro-active crowd control by the Metropolitan Toronto Police has resulted in fewer injuries and less property damage in that city—and police services from across the country are visiting Toronto to learn the techniques.

What was once known as Toronto's Riot Squad has evolved into the Public Order Unit (POU), consisting of highly-trained volunteer officers whose aim is to defuse potentially violent situations—but who are equipped with the clout to halt any disorder quickly.

Staff Sergeant Wes Ryan, officer in charge of the unit, called it a pro-active crowd management team. "The aim of the unit is to facilitate a safe return to normal policing activities whenever crowds that have the potential for disorder gather," he said.

"We accomplish this by placing members of the unit in contact with crowd members during the early stages of an event. Disorder can hopefully be prevented or, if already occurring, brought to an end. The officers interact with the crowd and through the use of well-established techniques of crisis intervention, reduce anxiety, individualize crowd members and maintain order," he said.



"In any crowd situation that has the potential for disorder, it is important that the police not lose the initiative with the crowd. One of the ways to accomplish this is by incorporating tactics that are flexible, adaptable and highly mobile. All tactics used by the unit speak to these three concepts."

Initial training for unit members comprises four days for all ranks, along with command level training for supervisors. Members of the unit receive extensive and ongoing training in such topics as crowd behavior theory, tactics, defensive training, equipment usage and crisis resolution.

Members are also required to complete a week-long course on crisis intervention held at the Metropolitan

Toronto Police Service College. This is enhanced with a one-day training program held every two months that incorporates simulations of real events.

The entire training program reinforces the unit's mandate for pro-active crowd management. This allows the unit to be in attendance at gatherings prior to the situation becoming volatile and—upon assessing the situation—through discussion and other methods, control the disturbance without resorting to traditional riot control techniques.

If early intervention is not successful, the unit has the capability to quickly assume the more traditional police role of crowd control and to

use traditional methods to break up an unruly crowd.

Examples of 'pro-active' crowd management:

Before disorder:

- Greet crowd members as they arrive.
- Initiate conversations, humanize crowd members.
- Meet with organizers before an event and assist with the formation of 'peer' security groups within the crowd.
- Present subtle 'shows of force' to crowds and then take them away so as not to antagonize the group.

Once disorder begins:

- Focus on element of crowd involved in criminal activity by tactical deployment of unit officers and assign regular uniformed officers to assist non-participating crowd members in leaving area.
- Perform aggressive mobile patrol tactics using a 'caravan' of unit vehicles.
- Position a highly-recognizable 'prison bus' to act as deterrent to less-committed crowd members

Using these techniques, the unit gained a reputation for dealing with events that had the potential for greater violence as well as quickly calming the crowds.

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An integral part of the crowd management techniques is the Mounted Unit. These officers train with the POU and assist in handling large crowds. The mounted unit, viewed by most people in crowd situations in a positive manner, helps crowds to see the directions given on where movement will be allowed.

Along with regular uniformed officers, the POU has successfully managed crowds approaching one million people, such as the one that gathered when the Toronto Blue Jays baseball team won its first pennant.

Membership in the unit is voluntary, with male and female candidates asked to make a three-year commitment. During that time, officers transferred to plainclothes details are not required to leave the unit and continue to participate in training and call-outs.

Unit officers continue their daily job functions, which range from street patrol to planning, unit management

and specialized investigative functions. This allows a highly-trained cadre to exist with minimal impact on the daily operation of the service.

Another benefit of having volunteer members in the unit is that their training can be used on a day-to-day basis, with senior officers becoming more confident in their abilities to use the training to control spontaneous eruptions of civil disobedience.

The number of officers in the unit is confidential, but the service is actively training with a view to having several hundred fully-qualified unit officers available for deployment. The unit represents the ethnic mix of the Toronto police service and has 15 female officers serving with it.

There is no extra pay for being a member of the unit (although the nature of their duties sometimes involves working overtime, for which the officers are paid in accordance with service policy).

The unit has an annual operating budget of about \$80,000 (in Canadian dollars), which includes clothing, equipment and training. In addition, there are the salaries of about C\$180,000 for three full-time officers. It costs about C\$ 1,200 to fully equip an officer for the unit. Vehicles used by the POU are shared with other units. The costs for these vehicles are charged to those other units as they use them far more than the POU.

The changed focus on crowd control had its roots in 1988 when the city hosted an economic summit of the Group of Seven industrial countries. Part of the Metropolitan Toronto Police assignment was the monitoring and control of public demonstrations at the conference site.

Until then, crowd or riot control had usually been performed by rank and file officers, with it once being the responsibility of the Emergency Task Force. An effort had been made in the early 1980s to train area foot officers in riot control tactics because of increasing disobedience and violence at demonstrations.

This training, although including the traditional riot control maneuvers, also addressed the need for officers to understand crowd dynamics and thereby increase the forecasting ability of

officers at demonstration scenes. This type of training was credited with limiting the potential for violence at a number of events, but—except for the training of new recruits at the Ontario Provincial Police training college and the Metropolitan Toronto Police College—it did not continue.

The Economic Summit provided the catalyst for the re-institution of structured public order training. Planning officers were assigned to develop a program that met today's standards of policing.

"This evolutionary process included extensive research into methods and tactics used by police and military units from around the world," Ryan said. "It also involved sending members of our unit on specialized crowd-related courses to such places as England and the United States.

"The payoff is that we have learned from the experiences of other jurisdictions that have a long history of dealing with violent crowds," Ryan said.

Staff Superintendent David Cowan and Staff Sergeant John Bukowski visited Britain on a fact-finding mission in 1987 and returned with a basis for the formation of a structured unit. Both men have always been strong supporters of the Public Order Unit and the concept of disorder prevention rather than disorder reaction.

The British visit was considered a turning point. The London Metropolitan Police system of crowd control evolved after many years of disorder which saw a number of people—including police officers—injured or killed and massive amounts of property destroyed.

"Their tactics and training speak to officer safety, and the London force spends the time and money to train officers to a high level of tactical proficiency," Ryan said. "They also make good use of resources such as mounted (units) and vehicles."

"The British disorder 'command level'¹ training—national in scope—is ongoing and competency-based, which provides each police force in England with a cadre of disorder commanders. These officers have the training and the confidence to deal with disorder in a professional manner and not overreact to crowd violence," Ryan said.

Toronto planning officers culled the best of the techniques available to design the training package that emphasized a pro-active style of public order management. "We are able to respond, rather than react to disorder," Ryan said. "The result has been fewer injuries and less property damage during those crowd situations that have traditionally been violent in this city.

"The Public Order Unit is progressive and we are constantly modifying, improving and developing methods and tactics that assist in the maintenance of order in this city," Ryan said.

Deputy Chief Robert Molyneaux, the original commander of the unit when he was a staff inspector, said at the start there was a reluctance to encourage the unit's operations. "The idea that officers were being taken for week-long training periods from different units from across the city and that any overtime incurred at that point was being taken from the respective units was hard to sell to the unit commanders, some of whom could never see them using the unit," he said.

"When the unit was formed, the command officers and the chief were nervous about allowing unit members to be seen in their new equipment, their helmets, their shields and their black coveralls. In many instances, even when deployed, we were hidden and still only kept as a reactive unit, as a riot squad and not pro-actively. We lost a number of officers because of that type of handling," Molyneaux said.

"This problem was overcome when finally the police chief directed that when the unit was called out, it would be deployed and it would not be hidden away." The unit's performance during the G-7 Economic Summit set the seal on its acceptance.

"We were deployed on a daily basis and on several occasions required to make numbers of arrests that could not have been made if it had not been for the training of the unit," Molyneaux recalled.

"The manner in which the unit was shown on television all over the world as being a pro-active, well-managed, well-disciplined unit went a long way to allowing us to continue and allowed the command officers to let us go for-

ward and find money in the budget so we could equip ourselves."

Unlike its early days, the unit now has a permanent place on the organizational chart of the force. It has a permanent administration staff—a staff sergeant, sergeant and constable—and it has its own budget.

Molyneaux said one strategy that was quickly learned was that if the unit was to be deployed, it should be done early. "They should be put in, if possible, in locations before the event takes place," he said. "For example, let's assume the Blue Jays win. The officers should be on the street early, meet the crowd going to the game, shake hands, let them see you out there, and then they are not surprised when they leave the game, but they do know and they do remember that there is going to be a police presence."

One unique feature of the unit is the inclusion of ambulance personnel—paramedics—who are normally attached to the Metro Toronto Department of Ambulance Services. The paramedics, who wear similar protective equipment but carry no weapons, are specially trained alongside regular officers in the unit and are used specifically to deal with officer injury. This allows other officers to continue with their assigned tasks, knowing that the injured members are well looked after. It is a built-in security blanket for the Unit. The paramedics also cross-train with unit members and give them additional training in emergency care.

"Unit officers recognize the value in working as a team and each member is committed to the prevention of disorder, rather than the reaction to it,"¹ Ryan said. "Perhaps its greatest strength lies in the quality and dedication of the officers assigned to it. All officers in the unit are volunteers. They are well versed and committed to the role they play in managing crowds in this city."

"The Public Order Unit operates as a 'part-time' response unit, meeting requests for assistance from individual unit commanders. I see this continuing as it has proved to be both efficient and cost effective."

Members of the Metro Toronto Police Auxiliary, on a voluntary basis, assist with logistical support to ensure

unit officers are kept supplied with food and drink during training and on long call-outs.

Ryan said the unit also has a role in community policing initiatives. "Through attendance at community meetings, members of the unit will develop and maintain close contacts with the diverse communities that make up Metropolitan Toronto," he said.

Molyneaux agreed the benefit of the experience and training received by unit officers has spread throughout the service. "Commanders recognize the training that officers have in the unit and they use them on a daily basis to handle crowd situations, to read crowds. The commanders rely on them for advice in handling strike situations. They can also be deployed and actually be put in charge of other constables, which we have done on several occasions."

The unit's success has been noticed across Canada. "Evidence of our success is the increasing number of police agencies coming to us for training," Ryan said. "The pro-active crowd management idea is gaining widespread acceptance in this country, and I firmly believe that it provides for accountable and responsible police response to disorderly crowds. L&O

Alan Harman is LAW and ORDER'S international correspondent, based in Ireland.



I remember my social security number, my address, my auto license, my phone number and my blood type—but I don't know who I am.