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COMMUNITY ORIENTED POLICING SERVICES  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

Problem-Oriented Guides for Police  
Problem-Specific Guides Series  
No. 28

# Street Racing

by Kenneth J. Peak  
Ronald W. Glensor





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Kenneth J. Peak  
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This project was supported by cooperative agreement #2002CKWX0003 by the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions contained herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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ISBN: 1-932582-42-8

December 2004

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## About the Problem-Specific Guides Series

The *Problem-Specific Guides* summarize knowledge about how police can reduce the harm caused by specific crime and disorder problems. They are guides to prevention and to improving the overall response to incidents, not to investigating offenses or handling specific incidents. The guides are written for police—of whatever rank or assignment—who must address the specific problem the guides cover. The guides will be most useful to officers who

- **Understand basic problem-oriented policing principles and methods.** The guides are not primers in problem-oriented policing. They deal only briefly with the initial decision to focus on a particular problem, methods to analyze the problem, and means to assess the results of a problem-oriented policing project. They are designed to help police decide how best to analyze and address a problem they have already identified. (An assessment guide has been produced as a companion to this series and the COPS Office has also published an introductory guide to problem analysis. For those who want to learn more about the principles and methods of problem-oriented policing, the assessment and analysis guides, along with other recommended readings, are listed at the back of this guide.)
  - **Can look at a problem in depth.** Depending on the complexity of the problem, you should be prepared to spend perhaps weeks, or even months, analyzing and responding to it. Carefully studying a problem before responding helps you design the right strategy, one that is most likely to work in your community. You should not blindly adopt the responses others have used; you must decide whether they are appropriate to your local situation. What is true in one place may not be true
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elsewhere; what works in one place may not work everywhere.

- **Are willing to consider new ways of doing police business.** The guides describe responses that other police departments have used or that researchers have tested. While not all of these responses will be appropriate to your particular problem, they should help give a broader view of the kinds of things you could do. You may think you cannot implement some of these responses in your jurisdiction, but perhaps you can. In many places, when police have discovered a more effective response, they have succeeded in having laws and policies changed, improving the response to the problem.
  - **Understand the value and the limits of research knowledge.** For some types of problems, a lot of useful research is available to the police; for other problems, little is available. Accordingly, some guides in this series summarize existing research whereas other guides illustrate the need for more research on that particular problem. Regardless, research has not provided definitive answers to all the questions you might have about the problem. The research may help get you started in designing your own responses, but it cannot tell you exactly what to do. This will depend greatly on the particular nature of your local problem. In the interest of keeping the guides readable, not every piece of relevant research has been cited, nor has every point been attributed to its sources. To have done so would have overwhelmed and distracted the reader. The references listed at the end of each guide are those drawn on most heavily; they are not a complete bibliography of research on the subject.
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- **Are willing to work with other community agencies to find effective solutions to the problem.** The police alone cannot implement many of the responses discussed in the guides. They must frequently implement them in partnership with other responsible private and public entities. An effective problem-solver must know how to forge genuine partnerships with others and be prepared to invest considerable effort in making these partnerships work.

These guides have drawn on research findings and police practices in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia. Even though laws, customs and police practices vary from country to country, it is apparent that the police everywhere experience common problems. In a world that is becoming increasingly interconnected, it is important that police be aware of research and successful practices beyond the borders of their own countries.

The COPS Office and the authors encourage you to provide feedback on this guide and to report on your own agency's experiences dealing with a similar problem. Your agency may have effectively addressed a problem using responses not considered in these guides and your experiences and knowledge could benefit others. This information will be used to update the guides. If you wish to provide feedback and share your experiences it should be sent via e-mail to [cops\\_pubs@usdoj.gov](mailto:cops_pubs@usdoj.gov).



For more information about problem-oriented policing, visit the Center for Problem-Oriented Policing online at [www.popcenter.org](http://www.popcenter.org) or via the COPS website at [www.cops.usdoj.gov](http://www.cops.usdoj.gov). This website offers free online access to:

- the *Problem-Specific Guides* series,
- the companion *Response Guides* and *Problem-Solving Tools* series,
- instructional information about problem-oriented policing and related topics,
- an interactive training exercise,
- online access to important police research and practices, and
- on-line problem analysis module.



## **Acknowledgments**

The *Problem-Oriented Guides for Police* are very much a collaborative effort. While each guide has a primary author, other project team members, COPS Office staff and anonymous peer reviewers contributed to each guide by proposing text, recommending research and offering suggestions on matters of format and style.

The principal project team developing the guide series comprised Herman Goldstein, professor emeritus, University of Wisconsin Law School; Ronald V. Clarke, professor of criminal justice, Rutgers University; John E. Eck, professor of criminal justice, University of Cincinnati; Michael S. Scott, clinical assistant professor, University of Wisconsin Law School; Rana Sampson, police consultant, San Diego; and Deborah Lamm Weisel, director of police research, North Carolina State University.

Karin Schmerler, Rita Varano and Nancy Leach oversaw the project for the COPS Office. Rebecca Kanable edited the guide. Research for the guides was conducted at the Criminal Justice Library at Rutgers University under the direction of Phyllis Schultze.

The project team also wishes to acknowledge the members of the San Diego, National City and Savannah police departments who provided feedback on the guides' format and style in the early stages of the project, as well as the line police officers, police executives and researchers who peer reviewed each guide.

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## The Problem of Street Racing

The guide begins by describing the problem of street racing and reviewing factors that contribute to it. The guide then identifies a series of questions that might assist you in analyzing your local street racing problem. Finally, the guide reviews responses to the problem and what is known about these from evaluative research and police practice.

While street racing and cruising share some common characteristics, there are important differences between the two activities and those who participate in them.<sup>†</sup> Cruising typically involves an older crowd, and is a highly public and largely nostalgic event that is often confined to downtown areas. Cruising can also provide an economic boost to the community.<sup>††</sup> Street racing typically involves a younger crowd that conducts its activities in an underground fashion to avoid police attention and presents significant risks of serious personal injury.

<sup>†</sup> See the POP Guide on *Cruising*.

<sup>††</sup> Northern Nevada's "Hot August Nights" event, for example, generates \$132 million for the Reno and Sparks economies, and brings more than a half million people to the area during the weeklong event (RRC Associates, 2003).

<sup>†††</sup> Hondas, Acuras, and other preferred racing vehicles are among the top five makes of vehicles stolen nationally (Sloan, 2004).

## Related Problems

Police must also address other problems related to street racing, which are not directly addressed in this guide. Other problems that may call for separate analysis and responses include:

- auto theft<sup>†††</sup>,
- assaults (including assaults in retaliation for failure to pay racing bets<sup>1</sup>),
- cruising,
- curfew violations,
- drunken driving and driving under the influence of drugs,



† For example, a racer wagers his car's racing wheels or custom seat covers and loses; he then files a police report and insurance claim stating the items were stolen in order to obtain a new set; or, a racer who blows an engine will abandon the vehicle and then report it stolen, to acquire money for a replacement (Sloan, 2004).

†† A 78-year-old man was killed in Los Angeles by a speeding driver who had just seen the movie, and in Redwood City, California, officers arrested six men caught racing down Interstate 280 at more than 120 miles per hour; all had ticket stubs from the film in their pockets (Squatriglia and Nevius, 2003). In San Diego County, California, where the movie was made, 15 people were killed in racing-related incidents in the year after the movie's release (Reno, 2002).

- gang-related activity,
- insurance fraud (relating to racers betting on outcomes),<sup>†</sup>
- illegal vehicle modification (e.g., smog control alteration),
- illicit gambling,
- noise complaints,
- public intoxication/urination and other public order offenses,
- theft and fencing of auto parts,
- thefts from autos,
- trespassing, and
- vandalism and littering.

The American street-racing tradition dates back to the 1950s, and has long been a staple of Hollywood movies, including films such as "Rebel Without a Cause" (1955), "American Graffiti" (1973), and "Grease" (1978). But no movie did more to boost the popularity of street racing than the 2001 surprise hit, "The Fast and the Furious," which grossed nearly \$80 million in its first 10 days in theaters and includes spectacular racing scenes and daring stunts (including one where a car swerves back and forth beneath a speeding tractor-trailer).<sup>2</sup> Although the movie studio issued public service announcements that encouraged safe and legal driving, the film likely provided fresh inspiration to street racers.<sup>††</sup>

The street racing population consists of several distinct demographic groupings. One is estimated to be between 18 and 24 years of age, generally living at home and typically having little income.<sup>3</sup> Another group involves predominantly older (25 to 40 years of age) white males who engage in building and racing the older types of

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"muscle cars:" Corvettes, Camaros, Mustangs, and so on. Asian and Hispanic males of a wide range of ages and driving later model imported cars—such as Hondas, Acuras, Mitsubishiis, and Nissans—are another group.<sup>4</sup> Presently, the latter group dominates the street racing scene.<sup>5</sup>

Police suspect that many racers engage in illegal activities in order to finance their hobby; some agencies report that stolen vehicles have been stripped of parts that were later recovered from street racing vehicles.<sup>6</sup> Whether by lawful or unlawful means, many racers feel they must devote huge sums of money to "soup up" their race cars; a major upgrade, with supercharger blowers, nitrous oxide systems, and other high-performance equipment can easily exceed \$10,000.<sup>7</sup> For many racers, getting the maximum performance out of their cars is very important to them and they will expend a tremendous amount of time, money, and effort toward that end.<sup>8</sup>

*quebecstreetracing.org*



**Many street racers spend large amounts of money upgrading their cars' performance.**



How dangerous is street racing? Data are difficult to obtain, because neither the federal government nor the insurance industry tracks related casualties, nor is software yet available for creating a database of street racing.<sup>9</sup> However, measures are being taken in some jurisdictions to address this shortcoming and are discussed below. One unofficial estimate, derived from examining news reports and police data from 10 major cities and extrapolating on the basis of national population figures, is that at least 50 people die each year as a result of street racing.<sup>10</sup> Although related deaths are difficult to quantify, media reports confirm that street racing takes its toll on innocent people as well as street racers, passengers, and onlookers.

At the root of the problem is the fact that youths have always had, according to one scholar, a "profound need for speed."<sup>11</sup> This love of speed is not restricted to the youth of the United States; indeed, the problem has reached serious levels in Canada, Australia, Germany, England, France, New Zealand, and Turkey.<sup>12</sup> In Canada, where a Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer was killed by a racer in 2002<sup>13</sup> and another 18 people died in the Toronto area in street racing incidents during a four-year period,<sup>14</sup> a new law was introduced in which street racing is an aggravating factor when sentencing persons convicted of dangerously or negligently operating a motor vehicle.<sup>15</sup> In Vancouver, British Columbia, street racing can include an activity known as a "hat race," also known as a "kamikaze" or "cannonball run," in which drivers put money in a hat; the money is taken to an undisclosed location from which a call is made, informing the drivers where the cash awaits. The first driver to get there wins all the money. Pedestrians have been killed during such races.<sup>16</sup>

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*SDStreetracing.com*



**Race starters and observers are often positioned very close to the racing vehicles, putting themselves at considerable risk of injury.**

Today in the United States, the racing tradition replays itself during every weekend in thousands of communities in the nation. The primary difference today is that street races are extraordinarily brazen and elaborately orchestrated functions, involving flaggers; timekeepers; lookouts equipped with computers mounted in their cars, cell phones, police scanners, two-way radios, and walkie-talkies; and websites that announce race locations and even calculate the odds of getting caught by the police.<sup>17</sup> Some websites even provide recaps of the previous night's races, complete with ratings of police presence, crowd size, and a link to the police agency so the curious can see if a warrant has been issued for their arrest.<sup>18</sup>

Street races typically involve racers and spectators meeting at a popular gathering place, often on a relatively remote street in an industrial area. Here they decide where to race; they then convoy to the site, where a one-eighth or one-quarter mile track is marked off. Cars line up at the starting line, where a starter stands between them and drops his or her hands to begin the race. Several hundred spectators may be watching. Unlike racetracks that allow spectators to observe races in a safe, closed environment,



these illegal street races encourage spectators to stand near possibly inexperienced drivers and poorly maintained vehicles—a combination that can be deadly for onlookers standing a few feet away from vehicles racing at highway speed.<sup>19</sup> Other peripheral activities may be involved as well. For example, racers and spectators engage in what are termed "sideshows," such as using vehicles and onlookers to block off an intersection and thus backing up regular vehicular traffic for considerable distances and preventing the police from arriving at the scene; then the racers at the intersection engage in 360° burnouts, races, and so on.<sup>20</sup> Racers also participate in what is termed the "centipede," where they form a convoy of vehicles and play follow-the-leader, darting in and around normal traffic at high speeds. Or, they may speed around corners to see how far they can slide their tires.

Street racing can also be unorganized and sporadic in nature, involving impromptu, one-time races between persons who do not know one another; the police generally have little means for dealing with these types of racers other than utilizing the media to make it very clear that, if caught, the violators will be severely prosecuted.<sup>21</sup>

The specific harms caused by street racing include:

- vehicle crashes (deaths and injuries to drivers, passengers, onlookers, or innocent bystanders; and property damage);
  - noise (from racing vehicles and crowds);
  - vandalism and litter at racing locations (including businesses where racers commonly gather);
  - loss of commercial revenue (if racing crowds obstruct or intimidate potential customers); and
-



- excess wear and tear on public streets (painted street markings commonly are damaged by the burning rubber of vehicle tires).<sup>22</sup>

Retaliatory offenses may also occur, such as when citizens try to deal with the problem themselves by placing nails on the ground where racers congregate or vandalizing racers' cars, for example.

*Marion (Ind.) Chronicle-Tribune*



**Crashes caused by street racing are often spectacular and cause serious injury and property damage.**

## **Factors Contributing to Street Racing**

Understanding the factors that contribute to your problem will help you frame your own local analysis questions, determine good effectiveness measures, recognize key intervention points, and select appropriate responses.



There are several reasons why street racing can become, or remain over time, a popular pastime in a community:

- It provides an unsupervised activity and environment.
- It attracts people who are too young for bars or other adult-only activities (especially in cities having a dearth of alternatives for their youth).
- It affords a means of socializing with friends.
- It provides a means of showing off one's motor vehicle and driving ability.
- It provides drivers, passengers, and onlookers the exhilaration of speed.<sup>23</sup>

Roadway location and design can also contribute to street racing. For example, a roadway located in a remote, perhaps industrial, area that is straight, wide, and close to arterial streets (for quick getaways from the police) will be favored by street racers.<sup>24</sup> The existence of car clubs and/or gangs in an area can also create or exacerbate a community's street racing problems.<sup>25</sup>



## Understanding Your Local Problem

The information provided above is only a generalized description of street racing. You must combine the basic facts with a more specific understanding of your local problem. Analyzing the local problem carefully will help you design a more effective response strategy.

### Asking the Right Questions

#### *Data Gathering and Analysis*

A shortcoming at present is the lack of dedicated coding and analysis of street racing data in most police agencies. No software presently exists for the identification and analysis of racing offenses, and agencies must typically hand search their records for higher-level analyses. Others have a dedicated calls-for-service code specifically for racing issues that the officers can use for reporting and communications personnel can query. A problem that can arise with such coding, however, is that it may fail to include other offenses that flow from, or arise out of, illegal racing (auto thefts, other thefts, assaults, trespassing, and so on), or to provide information about groups that gather at retail parking lots. At a minimum, the crime analysis unit or communications section should be contacted to determine how many personnel hours are spent at racing locations, including days of the week and times of day. Furthermore, the agency is advised to create at least a rudimentary database or modify existing records management systems so that street racing-related activity (including crimes, disturbances, traffic and pedestrian stops, vehicle and pedestrian traffic congestion, traffic crashes, arrests, etc.) can be tracked. If such a database

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does not exist, you may have to manually search through individual complaint records and police reports to determine which are related to street racing.

### **California Agencies' Efforts to Obtain Racing Data**

Police in California have been attempting for years to convince the state to alter its accident investigation form to include coding for street racing. Once the procedure is developed statewide, agencies will be able to obtain reliable data. Until the new form is developed, the California Highway Patrol has disseminated a training memo instructing local officers where to include a racing-related notation. The key for California agencies, and eventually for other agencies nationwide, will be to provide officers with necessary training. Most officers are unfamiliar with street racing codes, rules, and laws; therefore, as the ability is expanded for agencies to track racing incidents, if the responding or investigating officer is not properly trained, a concern is that the proper boxes on the form will not be completed. The San Diego Police Department presently offers training in this regard; thus far, about 2,000 officers have been trained in how to determine when a racing relationship exists with a reported incident.<sup>26</sup>

In Milpitas, California, each time an officer is either dispatched to any type of call for service or initiates any activity (e.g., traffic or pedestrian stops, arrests, citation, accepting a report of a crime, etc.), at the conclusion of that activity, the officer is required to provide the communications division with a classification code that identifies the specific type of activity. As with all other offenses, a specific classification was simply developed that includes street racing incidents. Race-related traffic enforcement stops; disturbances of any kind involving racers; crimes in which racers are listed as suspects; or other circumstances in which individuals are actively racing at, loitering about, or traversing to and from common racing venues are examples of such classifications.<sup>27</sup>



### *Tracking Racing Websites*

Several race-related websites exist that may be used by the police to track racers' activities as well as provide useful information to racers. For example, [Streetracing.com](http://Streetracing.com) provides racing and club news, articles, events, calendars, chatrooms, message boards, auctions, and other information for many cities and states. The Specialty Equipment Market Association (SEMA) is a 5,000-member trade organization for the aftermarket industry; although SEMA often mounts strong opposition to police efforts and proposed racing legislation, it may offer another avenue to reach racers through the retailers who sell parts.<sup>28</sup> Others, such as [RaceLegal.com](http://RaceLegal.com) and the National Hot Rod Association's [NHRA.com](http://NHRA.com), focus more on encouraging legal racing, and attempt to educate their readers about related laws and statistics (e.g., numbers of illegal racers who were recently killed, injured, cited, arrested, or who had vehicles seized or licenses revoked).

The following are some critical questions you should ask in analyzing your particular street racing problem, even if the answers are not always readily available. Your answers to these and other questions will help you choose the most appropriate set of responses later on.

### *Incidents*

- What is the level of calls for service and complaints attributable to street racing in the area? What, specifically, is the nature of these calls and complaints?
  - How many vehicle crashes are related to street racing?
  - How, specifically, does street racing contribute to these crashes? Racing vehicles crash into one another? Into stationary objects or pedestrians adjacent to the roadway? Into non-participating vehicles?
-



- What percentage of these crashes involves fatalities, personal injuries, and property damage? Hit-and-run accidents?
- Are younger, less experienced drivers more likely to be involved in vehicle crashes?
- How many passengers are typically in racing vehicles?
- Is traffic congestion caused by street racing impeding emergency traffic (e.g., ambulance and fire vehicles)?
- Do business owners report decreasing revenues as a direct result of racers and spectators gathering on their premises?
- Have there been any local occurrences (e.g., the closure of a local legitimate "drag strip") or issues that may have resulted in increasing street racing incidents?
- Have there been reports of retaliatory offenses against street racers?

### *Victims*

- Who is harmed by street racing (e.g., street racers, passengers, onlookers, innocent motorists, innocent bystanders, business owners, residents)?
  - What is known about the victims of street racing-related incidents (e.g., demographics, their involvement in street racing)?
  - How many people have been killed or injured as a result of street racing? What is the nature and seriousness of those injuries? (You may want to examine hospital emergency room records because not all crash-related or assault injuries are reported to police.)
  - What is the public's opinion of street racing? Do people want street racing stopped or merely controlled in a legal setting? (Public opinion may be expressed in letters to the editor, surveys, meetings, informal conversations, formal complaints, and so forth.)
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### *Offenders*

- What is known about street racers, their passengers, and onlookers? (Age, ethnicity, group affiliation?)
- If there are organized groups involved in street racing, are they criminal gangs? Are there tensions and confrontations between various groups involved in street racing?
- Why do street racers say they race (e.g., lack of alternative activities, for social reasons, to show off their cars, for the thrill of speed, etc.)?
- Do the participants include unsupervised youths who are on the streets in violation of a curfew?
- Where do the racers live? Are they local or from out of town?
- What percentage of persons cited or arrested for street racing are repeat offenders?
- Who are the worst offenders?
- Are street racers operating unsafe vehicles or vehicles that have undergone major modifications in order to maximize their speed?

### *Locations/Times*

- What is the nature of the area where street racing occurs (commercial, industrial, residential, open highway, etc.)?
  - How much pedestrian traffic is there in the area where street racing occurs? What other special hazards are there in the area where street racing occurs?
  - Where are traffic crashes occurring that appear to be related to street racing?
  - Where is the major street racing-related traffic volume in the city?
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- Where are the hot spots, and how many related offenses have occurred (such as disturbances; assaults; and weapons, liquor, drug, curfew, noise, vandalism, littering, trespassing, graffiti, and traffic violations)?
- Where are the preliminary gathering places for racers and spectators?
- In which area(s) does street racing occur? What are the means of ingress and egress into the area? Does the racing occur in residential or industrial areas? On public streets, or state or federal highways? Privately owned roadways?
- Is the racing concentrated in business areas, or residential areas, or both?
- Why are the most concentrated racing locations attractive to street racers?
- Is adequate lighting in these areas?
- When does street racing typically occur (time of day, day of week, time of month or year, during certain holidays or special events)?

### *Current Responses*

- Are there adequate state and local laws for meeting the needs of the police in addressing street racing problems?
  - Have stakeholders been identified and partnerships forged for dealing with the problem?
  - Do adequate resources exist for dealing with the problem?
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## Measuring Your Effectiveness

Measurement allows you to determine to what degree your efforts have succeeded, and suggests how you might modify your responses if they are not producing the intended results. You should take measures of your problem *before* you implement responses, to determine how serious the problem is, and *after* you implement them, to determine whether they have been effective. All measures should be taken in both the target area and the surrounding area. (For more detailed guidance on measuring effectiveness, see the companion guide to this series, *Assessing Responses to Problems: An Introductory Guide for Police Problem-Solvers*.)

The following are potentially useful measures of the effectiveness of responses to street racing:

- reduced numbers of various street racing-related offenses;
  - reduced numbers of calls for service concerning street racing, both in the racing area and across the jurisdiction;
  - reduced numbers of racers and spectators, if any, who are returning to their old racing spots;
  - reduced number and severity of injuries attributable to street racing;
  - reduced numbers of juveniles in violation of existing curfew and other laws;
  - increased satisfaction of complainants; and
  - increased profitability of businesses previously harmed by street racing.
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You should be alert to the possibility that your responses to street racing might displace racers and related offenses, either geographically or to other types of crimes. This might not be all bad if the displacement results in less overall harm. Crime and call-for-service data as well as websites should be monitored both locally and in other jurisdictions to determine whether racers are merely taking their activities to other venues.



## **Responses to the Problem of Street Racing**

Your analysis of your local problem should give you a better understanding of the factors contributing to it. Once you have analyzed your local problem and established a baseline for measuring effectiveness, you should consider possible responses to address the problem.

The following response strategies provide a foundation of ideas for addressing your particular problem. These strategies are drawn from a variety of research studies and police reports. There is little published research about street racing; most of what is known is drawn from police practice. Several of these strategies may apply to your community's problem. It is critical that you tailor responses to local circumstances, and that you can justify each response based on reliable analysis. In most cases, an effective strategy will involve implementing several different responses. Law enforcement responses alone are seldom effective in reducing or solving the problem. Do not limit yourself to considering what police can do: give careful consideration to who in your community shares responsibility for the problem and can help police better respond to it.

### **General Considerations for an Effective Strategy**

**1. Enlisting community support for addressing the problem.** Broad-based coalitions that incorporate the interests of the community are recommended. A combined effort will maximize the effects of responses and enhance the likelihood of success. The involvement

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and support of public officials, citizens, and business owners will be essential for the success of most, if not all, of the specific responses listed below.

Enlisting community support might include using members of a police Explorer post, citizens' police academy, senior citizens' groups, merchant association, and so on to report racers' activities to police.<sup>29</sup> Community support might also come from those who provide racers with their equipment, including shops selling high-performance car parts, and who are at risk for being burglarized for these parts. Although these shop owners may not wish to cooperate, if so inclined, they can be of considerable assistance in informing the police about racers' illegal activities.

**2. Educating and warning street racers.** Street racers can be informed about the dangers and legal consequences of racing, as well as police enforcement intentions. Among the media you can use are street racing websites (on which they commonly announce past and future events, host chat rooms, and have message boards), police agency websites, newspapers, television, radio, and personal contacts with street racers. A publicity campaign about the problem and enforcement actions has been central to many efforts to combat street racing problems. Performance shop owners also might be asked to provide customers information about existing laws and potential penalties for racing.

**3. Conducting surveillance of the street racing scene.** Street racers can be quite sophisticated in their efforts to avoid detection by police. Unmarked police vehicles, plainclothes officers, and video equipment may be covertly used to observe racers' movements and methods and to determine the problems they create,

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where they live, the kinds of cars they drive, license plate numbers, and so on. This allows for pre-race intervention, access to race areas to be closed off, and participants to later be charged. Racers' use of police scanners can be thwarted by using radio code words, in-car computers, and specially programmed cell phones. For example, one police agency programmed some cellular phones with a group-talk feature so that the officers and dispatchers could communicate effectively without using the police radio frequency when dealing with racer issues.<sup>30</sup> Marked units and uniformed personnel can then be called in to assist with any arrests. During undercover surveillances, police can videotape illegal street races and participants; later, crime reports can be written for each race and used to prepare arrest warrants for drivers and court orders for vehicle seizures.<sup>31</sup> Street racing websites can also be monitored for tracking racers' activities and communication.

† The San Diego Police Department trains insurance investigators in matters concerning racing (Sloan, 2004).

**4. Encouraging others to exercise informal control over street racing participants.** You may identify certain groups, organizations, or individuals who have the potential to exert significant influence over the behavior of street racing participants. For example, if street racing participants are high school students, school administrators might be persuaded to suspend or revoke the parking privileges of students identified as participants in or spectators of street racing incidents. Insurance companies, which also have an interest in the problem, may be persuaded not to pay claims for damages if the claimant was participating in racing.<sup>†</sup> Parents of street racing participants, properly educated about the dangers of street racing, may be encouraged to get more involved in controlling their children's behavior.



## Specific Responses to Street Racing

### *Enforcement*

**5. Enforcing ordinances and statutes.** You should review existing ordinances and statutes to determine whether police have adequate enforcement authority. Laws likely to be enforced against drivers include racing/reckless driving, driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs, and driving with suspended/revoked licenses. In some jurisdictions police officers and vehicle emission enforcement agents jointly conduct smog equipment inspections on street racing vehicles, issue the owner a citation if the equipment was disconnected or modified, and even order the vehicle removed from the street until it is brought into compliance with the law.<sup>32</sup> Officers might also attempt to identify people in the emissions testing industry who issue fraudulent emission certificates for the illegally modified vehicles.<sup>33</sup> Drivers should be checked for proof of insurance and vehicle registration. Officers can work with automotive experts to identify street racing vehicles that have been illegally enhanced or altered, or have mechanical defects. Enforcement against non-drivers might include violations for trespassing on private property of adjacent businesses, obstructing traffic (if standing in the roadway), or aiding in a speed contest (for people acting as starters for races). Dedicated race patrol teams may be necessary for concentrated enforcement during peak racing times.<sup>34</sup> Enforcement of curfew laws might also reduce the numbers of juveniles present at racing venues.



Following are some examples of how many police agencies have been aided with newly enacted ordinances and statutes in their attempts to prevent and address street racing:

- In California, a conviction for engaging in a "speed contest" (defined as a motor vehicle racing against another vehicle or being timed by a clock or other device) consists of a fine up to \$1,000 plus penalty assessments, up to 90 days in jail, or both. The perpetrator's license may be suspended or restricted for up to six months, and a police officer may impound a vehicle when the driver is arrested for engaging in a speed contest, for reckless driving, or for demonstrating exhibit of speed (for example, peeling or screeching of tires due to hard acceleration). A vehicle can be impounded for up to 30 days, and it costs the offender \$1,500 to retrieve it. Persons who aid or abet any speed contest (such as a person who flags the start of the race or places a barricade on the highway) can be charged with a misdemeanor.<sup>35</sup>
- The State of Texas enacted harsher penalties for street racing in 2003. The new law made street racing a more serious violation, punishable by up to six months in jail and a \$2,000 fine for both drivers and passengers; and up to a \$4,000 fine and one year in jail if the driver was intoxicated, had an open container of alcohol in the vehicle, or had previously been convicted of the same offense. Spectators can be cited and fined up to \$500 as well.



- Street racers can be charged with engaging in a speed contest and reckless driving, fined up to \$1,000, and sentenced to six months in jail in Reno, Nevada. Spectators within 200 feet of an illegal street race can also be arrested and fined up to \$200. The driver's vehicle can be impounded and storage fees assessed at \$50 per day.<sup>36</sup>
- The City of Fremont, California banned all traffic between 10 PM and 6 AM on 10 roads popular with street racers and allowed police to impound the vehicles of both drivers and spectators.<sup>37</sup>
- The City of Santee, California made it unlawful for any individual to be a spectator (within 200 feet) at an illegal speed contest, or where preparations are being made for an illegal speed contest; violators are subject to fines of up to \$1,000 and six months in jail.

**6. Impounding and/or forfeiting vehicles used for street racing.** Vehicles may be impounded and a fee assessed in order for the owner to retrieve the vehicle under an ordinance when the driver is arrested for engaging in a speed contest, for reckless driving, or for demonstrating exhibit of speed (e.g., peeling or screeching of tires due to hard acceleration). A vehicle forfeiture ordinance may be enacted to declare a vehicle a nuisance and it can be permanently seized if it was used in a race or exhibition of speed and the driver has a prior conviction for certain serious driving offenses (such as reckless driving or evading officers).

- The City of San Diego was among the first to pass a vehicle forfeiture ordinance, in 2003. A vehicle will be declared a nuisance and permanently seized if it was used in a race or exhibition of speed and the driver has a prior conviction for certain serious driving offenses (such as reckless driving or evading officers).<sup>38</sup>
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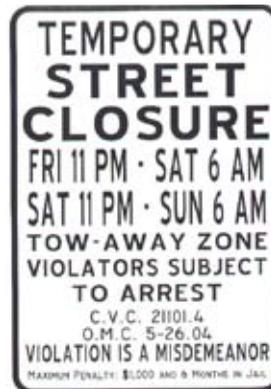
- The City Council of Los Angeles soon followed San Diego's example, also approving vehicle-forfeiture legislation. The vehicles are auctioned off and the money deposited into the city's general fund. Furthermore, police in both the City of Los Angeles and Los Angeles County can arrest spectators on a misdemeanor. In July 2003, the first man to be convicted under the Los Angeles law was sentenced to 18 months' probation and 10 days community service.<sup>39</sup> The city uses state Bureau of Automotive Repair investigators to inspect vehicles suspected of being illegally modified by their owners; a city ordinance prohibits disconnection, modification, or alteration of pollution control devices, and cited drivers must return their vehicles to their original factory specifications.<sup>40</sup>
- The City of Stockton, California, also targeted offenders' vehicles rather than the drivers, relying on the aforementioned state statute allowing the police to seize for 30 days vehicles that were used in reckless driving incidents.<sup>41</sup>

**7. Encouraging private businesses to adopt measures that will help address the problem.** Owners and managers of popular street racing gathering places (where street racers meet and plan their activities, show off their cars, socialize, and the problems begin to occur) must be enlisted in efforts to discourage street racing activity. Among the helpful measures are: posting "no trespassing" signs and authorizing police to enforce them, limiting after-hours access, employing private security during weekends, and closing earlier.



**8. Closing streets and/or altering or restricting traffic flow and parking.** Some jurisdictions have installed speed humps, barricades, "k-railing" (concrete barricades), and freeway message signs and billboards (both permanent and temporary) to control, warn, and inform racers;<sup>42</sup> others authorize police to erect barricades and close streets when racing becomes a problem.<sup>43</sup> Such latitude affords police the ability to move quickly to deal with problems as they develop. Parking can be prohibited on public properties and roadways in the race area to discourage spectators from congregating along roadsides during prime racing hours; offenders' vehicles can be towed.

*Ontario (Calif.) Police Department*



**Closing streets during peak racing times can help control street racing without unnecessarily disrupting legitimate traffic.**

### *Providing a Safe Alternative*

**9. Creating or encouraging racers' legal alternatives, such as relocating to a legal racing area.** Several cities and counties have successfully addressed their illegal street racing problem by creating, either on their own or in collaboration with other organizations, a legal racing venue. This is intended to divert people to a safer



racing environment, which allows racers to experience some of the positive aspects of legal drag racing—the fun, camaraderie, and excitement. Police can either align with an existing national program (for example, Beat the Heat, Racers Against Street Racing, the National Hot Rod Association) that encourages safe, legal, on-track racing, or implement their own local program.<sup>†</sup> Participant rules should be in place, such as racers must possess a valid driver's license and vehicle insurance, submit to vehicle safety inspections, and refrain from any use of alcohol at the event.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>†</sup> See the Redding (Calif.) Police Department street racing web page at [www.reddingpolice.org/StreetLegalDrags/](http://www.reddingpolice.org/StreetLegalDrags/)

*Novato (Calif.) Police Department*



**Legal, track-based alternatives to street racing are becoming more numerous. Among them is "Project X", a program initiated in 1997 to bridge the gap between police officers and high school aged street racers.**

Following are examples of such efforts:

- Beat the Heat is a national Cops and Kids community policing drag race program, which involves police officers in 30 states and two Canadian provinces. As an example, a police officer in Wewoka, Oklahoma (population 4,000) initiated the program. The officer races local men and women in his 1972 Chevrolet Camaro (with a 545-horsepower engine) at a local track. Teens can serve as honorary pit crew members



- for the Camaro.<sup>45</sup> The program originated in 1984 with the Jacksonville, Florida, Sheriff's Department and has grown rapidly; in 1999, more than 1 million young people were given the message that they should go to tracks to race their cars instead of racing in the street.<sup>46</sup>
- Concerned about illegal street racing and the dearth of legal racing venues, automobile manufacturers, police officials, racetrack owners, racers, automobile parts manufacturers, and the media met in California in early 2001 and formed Racers Against Street Racing (RASR); this organization is becoming a countrywide phenomenon that is being tested in driver's education classrooms and consists of a curriculum and video. RASR addresses the realities of street racing, and informs students about local street racing laws and legal alternatives in local areas.<sup>47</sup>
  - An officer in Redding, California obtained \$4,000 from local businesses to help start a racing program, "Street Legal Drags," at a local drag strip in mid-2002. Soon there were more than 200 cars (drivers paying \$10 to race) and more than 2,500 spectators (assessed \$5 per carload). Signs are posted informing racers how to register their vehicles, proceed to the starting line, and leave the track after the race. The Redding police website explains the program and provides detailed instructions for participants. Participants must have a registered, insured, safety-inspected vehicle and a valid driver's license; and no alcohol is allowed on the premises.<sup>48</sup>
  - Las Vegas, Nevada has Midnight Mayhem, Friday night amateur drag races from 10 PM to 2 AM at the local speedway's drag strip. The cost is \$10 for drivers and \$5 for spectators, and each night's activities include music, car shows, and other events for the 2,500 spectators and 400 drivers.<sup>49</sup>
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## Responses With Limited Effectiveness

**10. Installing speed bumps.** The installation of speed bumps can reduce or halt street racing, but they are hazardous to emergency vehicles and large trucks. Speed *bumps*, on the other hand, which are more gradual than speed *bumps*, permit vehicles to cross them safely at the speed limit and create less risk to trucks and emergency vehicles.

**11. Arresting and charging spectators as race participants.** Arresting participants for unlawful assembly or curfew violations can be ineffective if a local court rules that street race spectators are not participants.

**12. Citing and releasing racers.** Issuing citations to racers or spectators may be ineffective and a weak deterrent, because many such individuals believe that a citation is "just part of doing business." Furthermore, some parents disagree with laws intended to curb racing and believe that their children should be allowed to observe such activities and will simply pay the fine for the youth.<sup>50</sup>

**13. Deploying decoy police vehicles.** Placing "phantom cars"—unoccupied marked police cars—in racing areas to create the appearance of a police presence will generally not be effective, and the vehicles may be vandalized.<sup>51</sup>





## Appendix: Summary of Responses to Street Racing

The table below summarizes the responses to street racing, the mechanism by which they are intended to work, the conditions under which they ought to work best, and some factors you should consider before implementing a particular response. It is critical that you tailor responses to local circumstances, and that you can justify each response based on reliable analysis. In most cases, an effective strategy will involve implementing several different responses. Law enforcement responses alone are seldom effective in reducing or solving the problem.

Response No.	Page No.	Response	How It Works	Works Best If...	Considerations
<i>General Considerations for an Effective Response Strategy</i>					
1.	17	Enlisting community support for addressing the problem	Maximizes the community efforts by involving people as stakeholders	...public officials, government agencies, insurance companies, business owners (including car parts stores), and citizens are involved in the effort	Involvement of such individuals and entities are key to the success of responses that are employed
2.	18	Educating and warning street racers	Informs the street racers about the nature and extent of the problem from the community, police, legal, and safety perspectives	...the racers are informed of new and existing racing laws and enforcement actions to be taken, and then begin to fear arrest	Street racing and police agency websites, newspapers, television, radio, and personal contacts with street racers may be used



Response No.	Page No.	Response	How It Works	Works Best If...	Considerations
3.	18	Conducting surveillance of the street racing scene	Allows police to take preventive action to discourage street racing and to apprehend violators by providing them with knowledge about street racing times, locations, and offenders	...illegal races are prevented and access to race areas are blocked	Officers may encounter staffing shortages for large-scale operations; if racers become aware of police tactics, it will become more difficult to infiltrate the crowds <sup>52</sup>
4.	19	Encouraging others to exercise informal control over street racing participants	Persuades street racing participants to cease or curtail racing activity through informal social control	...street racing participants respect the opinions of those seeking to control their behavior and/or fear the consequences of failing to heed informal warnings	Street racing participants who feel marginalized from society are unlikely to respond to informal social control methods
<i>Specific Responses to Street Racing</i>					
5.	20	Enforcing ordinances and statutes	Deters offenders through threat of fines, incarceration, or seizure of vehicles	...enforcement is sufficiently certain that offenders believe they are likely to be apprehended; prosecutors are willing to prosecute and judges impose sufficient sanctions	Can be labor intensive and time consuming; creates risks of high-speed chases
6.	22	Impounding and/or forfeiting vehicles used for street racing	Deters speed racers through threat of loss of valuable property and means to race	...the ordinance is widely publicized to deter illegal racing, and an impound fee is assessed in order for the driver to reclaim the vehicle	Ordinances must be enacted providing for impounding or seizing vehicles; city prosecutors and other public officials must first support this approach



Response No.	Page No.	Response	How It Works	Works Best If...	Considerations
7.	23	Encouraging private businesses to adopt measures that will help address the problem	Deters racers and spectators from gathering to plan their activities and engaging in crime and disorder	...such measures as posting "no trespassing" signs, controlling access to the parking lot, hiring private security, and closing the business early can be used	Can be costly for business owners, both in terms of outlay (e.g., to hire private security personnel) and in lost revenues if closing early
8.	24	Closing streets and/or restricting traffic flow and parking	Prevents racers from using preferred roads; discourages spectators from gathering along roads	...there are limited alternative streets on which to race	May disrupt other legitimate use of the roadway; may displace racing to other more dangerous roads
9.	24	Creating and/or encouraging racers' relocation to a legal racing area	Diverts street racers to a safe, sanctioned location	...street racers are willing to race at legal racing venue; private enterprise is willing to fund and staff the racing venue	Legal liability and safety issues must be addressed
<i>Responses With Limited Effectiveness</i>					
10.	27	Installing speed bumps			Speed bumps, as opposed to speed humps, can damage the undercarriages of large vehicles and interfere with emergency vehicle responses
11.	27	Arresting and charging spectators as race participants			Defining spectators as participants may not withstand legal challenge



<b>Response No.</b>	<b>Page No.</b>	<b>Response</b>	<b>How It Works</b>	<b>Works Best If...</b>	<b>Considerations</b>
12.	27	Citing and releasing racers			Fines may be inadequate to deter persons heavily committed to racing
13.	27	Deploying decoy police vehicles			Police vehicles are vulnerable to vandalism



## Endnotes

- 1 Ontario Police Department (2000).
  - 2 Orwall (2001).
  - 3 Lau (2002); also see Ontario Police Department (2000), where the problem primarily involved "young adults."
  - 4 Wilkinson (1996).
  - 5 Clar (2003); also see San Diego Police Department (2003) and Stockton Police Department (2003).
  - 6 Lowery (2003).
  - 7 Wilkens (2003b).
  - 8 Leigh (1995).
  - 9 San Diego Police Department (2003).
  - 10 Neil (1999).
  - 11 Wilkens (2003a), quoting Stephen Bender.
  - 12 Wilkens (2003a).
  - 13 CBC News (2002).
  - 14 Toronto.cbc.ca (2002).
  - 15 CBC News (2003).
  - 16 Rendon (2001).
  - 17 Wilkens (2003a).
  - 18 Dobner (2001).
  - 19 Lau (2002).
  - 20 San Diego Police Department (2003).
  - 21 Sloan (2004).
  - 22 Ontario Police Department (2000).
  - 23 Lau (2002).
  - 24 Stockton Police Department (2003).
  - 25 Wilkinson (1996).
  - 26 Sloan (2004).
  - 27 Pangelinan (2004).
  - 28 Stokes (2003).
  - 29 Milpitas Police Department (2002).
  - 30 Pangelinan (2004).
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- 32 Wilkinson (1996).  
33 San Diego Police Department (2003).  
34 Lowery (2003).  
35 Clar (2003).  
36 Reno Police Department (2003).  
37 Squatriglia (2003).  
38 Velasquez (2003).  
39 Munoz (2003).  
40 Los Angeles Police Department (2001).  
41 Stockton Police Department (2003).  
42 Ontario Police Department (2000).  
43 Reno Police Department (2003); also see Ontario  
Police Department (2000) for passage and successful  
use of a new street-closure ordinance.  
44 See, for example, Wilkens (2003a), concerning a  
university professor who founded a nonprofit group  
that sponsors legal racing at San Diego's Qualcomm  
Stadium.  
45 Brinsfield (2001).  
46 Sibley (2001).  
47 Stokes (2003); PR Newswire Association (2003).  
48 Redding Police Department (2003).  
49 Przybys (2003).  
50 Ontario Police Department (2000).  
51 Wilkinson (1996).  
52 San Diego Police Department (2003).
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## Recommended Readings

- ***A Police Guide to Surveying Citizens and Their Environments***, Bureau of Justice Assistance, 1993. This guide offers a practical introduction for police practitioners to two types of surveys that police find useful: surveying public opinion and surveying the physical environment. It provides guidance on whether and how to conduct cost-effective surveys.
- ***Assessing Responses to Problems: An Introductory Guide for Police Problem-Solvers***, by John E. Eck (U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2001). This guide is a companion to the *Problem-Oriented Guides for Police* series. It provides basic guidance to measuring and assessing problem-oriented policing efforts.
- ***Conducting Community Surveys***, by Deborah Weisel (Bureau of Justice Statistics and Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 1999). This guide, along with accompanying computer software, provides practical, basic pointers for police in conducting community surveys. The document is also available at [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs).
- ***Crime Prevention Studies***, edited by Ronald V. Clarke (Criminal Justice Press, 1993, et seq.). This is a series of volumes of applied and theoretical research on reducing opportunities for crime. Many chapters are evaluations of initiatives to reduce specific crime and disorder problems.



- ***Excellence in Problem-Oriented Policing: The 1999 Herman Goldstein Award Winners.*** This document produced by the National Institute of Justice in collaboration with the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services and the Police Executive Research Forum provides detailed reports of the best submissions to the annual award program that recognizes exemplary problem-oriented responses to various community problems. A similar publication is available for the award winners from subsequent years. The documents are also available at [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij).
  - ***Not Rocket Science? Problem-Solving and Crime Reduction,*** by Tim Read and Nick Tilley (Home Office Crime Reduction Research Series, 2000). Identifies and describes the factors that make problem-solving effective or ineffective as it is being practiced in police forces in England and Wales.
  - ***Opportunity Makes the Thief: Practical Theory for Crime Prevention,*** by Marcus Felson and Ronald V. Clarke (Home Office Police Research Series, Paper No. 98, 1998). Explains how crime theories such as routine activity theory, rational choice theory and crime pattern theory have practical implications for the police in their efforts to prevent crime.
  - ***Problem Analysis in Policing,*** by Rachel Boba (Police Foundation, 2003). Introduces and defines problem analysis and provides guidance on how problem analysis can be integrated and institutionalized into modern policing practices.
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- ***Problem-Oriented Policing***, by Herman Goldstein (McGraw-Hill, 1990, and Temple University Press, 1990). Explains the principles and methods of problem-oriented policing, provides examples of it in practice, and discusses how a police agency can implement the concept.
  - ***Problem-Oriented Policing and Crime Prevention***, by Anthony A. Braga (Criminal Justice Press, 2003). Provides a thorough review of significant policing research about problem places, high-activity offenders, and repeat victims, with a focus on the applicability of those findings to problem-oriented policing. Explains how police departments can facilitate problem-oriented policing by improving crime analysis, measuring performance, and securing productive partnerships.
  - ***Problem-Oriented Policing: Reflections on the First 20 Years***, by Michael S. Scott (U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2000). Describes how the most critical elements of Herman Goldstein's problem-oriented policing model have developed in practice over its 20-year history, and proposes future directions for problem-oriented policing. The report is also available at [www.cops.usdoj.gov](http://www.cops.usdoj.gov).
  - ***Problem-Solving: Problem-Oriented Policing in Newport News***, by John E. Eck and William Spelman (Police Executive Research Forum, 1987). Explains the rationale behind problem-oriented policing and the problem-solving process, and provides examples of effective problem-solving in one agency.
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- ***Problem-Solving Tips: A Guide to Reducing Crime and Disorder Through Problem-Solving Partnerships*** by Karin Schmerler, Matt Perkins, Scott Phillips, Tammy Rinehart and Meg Townsend. (U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 1998) (also available at [www.cops.usdoj.gov](http://www.cops.usdoj.gov)). Provides a brief introduction to problem-solving, basic information on the SARA model and detailed suggestions about the problem-solving process.
  - ***Situational Crime Prevention: Successful Case Studies***, Second Edition, edited by Ronald V. Clarke (Harrow and Heston, 1997). Explains the principles and methods of situational crime prevention, and presents over 20 case studies of effective crime prevention initiatives.
  - ***Tackling Crime and Other Public-Safety Problems: Case Studies in Problem-Solving***, by Rana Sampson and Michael S. Scott (U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2000) (also available at [www.cops.usdoj.gov](http://www.cops.usdoj.gov)). Presents case studies of effective police problem-solving on 18 types of crime and disorder problems.
  - ***Using Analysis for Problem-Solving: A Guidebook for Law Enforcement***, by Timothy S. Bynum (U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2001). Provides an introduction for police to analyzing problems within the context of problem-oriented policing.
  - ***Using Research: A Primer for Law Enforcement Managers***, Second Edition, by John E. Eck and Nancy G. LaVigne (Police Executive Research Forum, 1994). Explains many of the basics of research as it applies to police management and problem-solving.
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## Other Problem-Oriented Guides for Police

### Problem-Specific Guides series:

1. **Assaults in and Around Bars.** Michael S. Scott. 2001.  
ISBN: 1-932582-00-2
  2. **Street Prostitution.** Michael S. Scott. 2001. ISBN: 1-932582-01-0
  3. **Speeding in Residential Areas.** Michael S. Scott. 2001.  
ISBN: 1-932582-02-9
  4. **Drug Dealing in Privately Owned Apartment Complexes.**  
Rana Sampson. 2001. ISBN: 1-932582-03-7
  5. **False Burglar Alarms.** Rana Sampson. 2001. ISBN: 1-932582-04-5
  6. **Disorderly Youth in Public Places.** Michael S. Scott. 2001.  
ISBN: 1-932582-05-3
  7. **Loud Car Stereos.** Michael S. Scott. 2001. ISBN: 1-932582-06-1
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Updated Date: December 9, 2004

