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Policing Mass Transit

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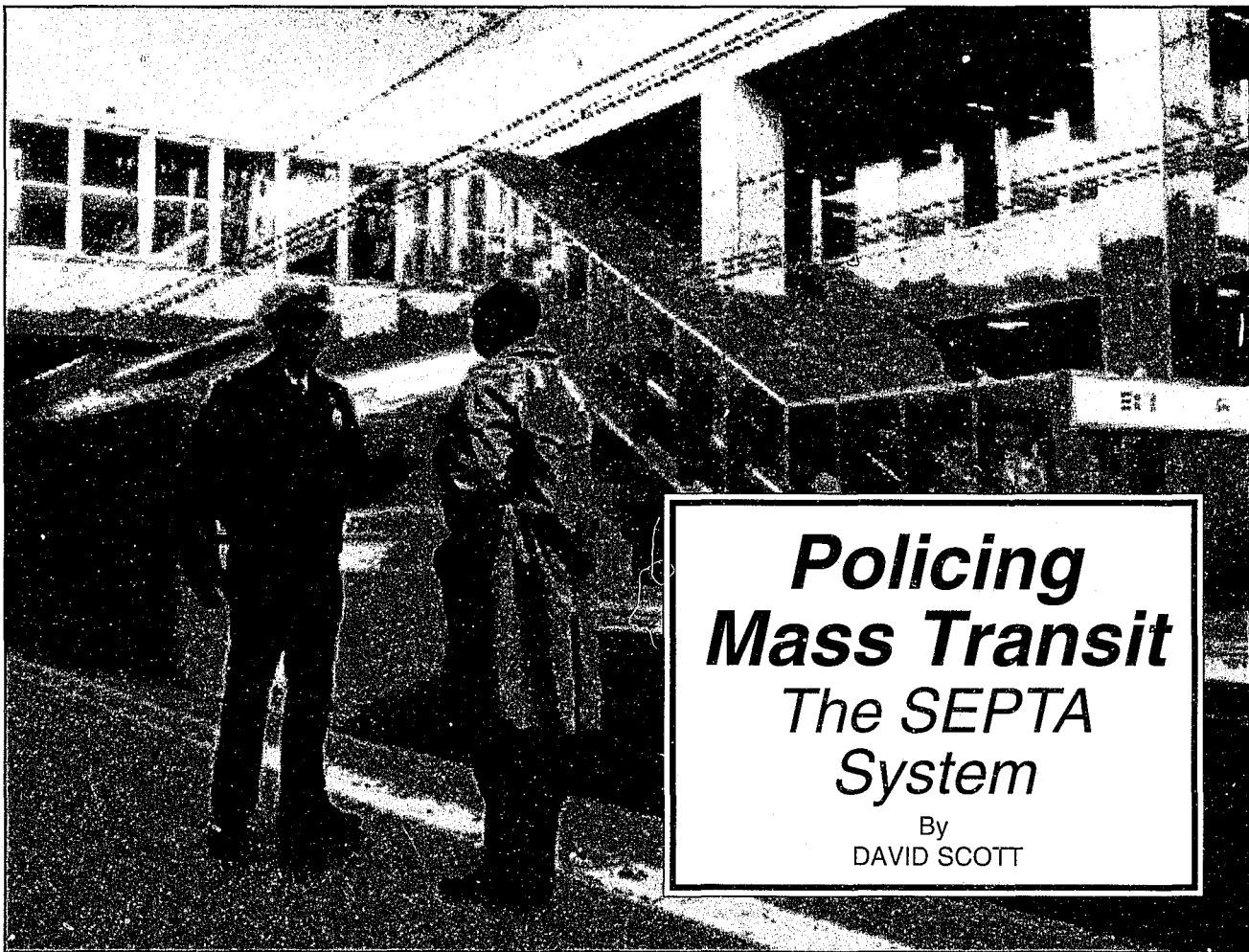
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SEPTA Police Department



***Policing
Mass Transit
The SEPTA
System***
By
DAVID SCOTT

Mass transportation continues to grow in the United States. Many cities are constructing, expanding, or rebuilding transit system infrastructures, and this trend to revitalize urban areas should continue. In addition, more stringent Federal air pollution laws encourage the construction and use of public transportation.

As more citizens use public transportation, the chances for increased criminal activity exist. In fact, many people already believe that the term "subway" is synonymous with the word "crime." Certainly, the entertainment industry

and the news media frequently depict the subway as a haven for criminal activity, and unfortunately, for some urban cities, this is a reality. Therefore, police departments must develop more effective means of policing transit systems.

Within the last decade, zone policing, a community policing concept that involves deploying personnel from central headquarters to ministations, rapidly gained popularity. Many police departments, including those in New York, Houston, Denver, and Newark, have implemented decentralization and other community policing programs.

Many people associate community policing programs with metropolitan police forces. Yet, transit police departments can also employ similar programs to reduce crime significantly on mass transportation systems.

In fact, since the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) Police Department implemented these policing techniques on the subway-elevated system in November 1991, serious crime on the system has decreased by 43 percent. This article presents an overview of SEPTA's zone system, as well as other community programs successfully employed by



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the department to combat crime and improve community relations.

BACKGROUND

Prior to the implementation of the zone concept, SEPTA's uniformed officers reported to a central headquarters and patrolled different parts of the transit system each day. Officers often rode from one end of the line to the other during their tours of duty. This practice limited continuity of supervision, and true accountability by the officers did not exist.

Furthermore, only administrative personnel suffered the consequences when problems arose. Top officials made all decisions, with front-line supervisors and officers on the beat having little input concerning the daily operations of the department. The zone system adopted by the department alleviated these problems.

THE ZONE SYSTEM

In 1990, a survey of SEPTA system riders indicated that passengers believed law enforcement on

the subway-elevated lines needed improvement. Passengers also perceived the system to be dirty, a condition that they associated with a lack of security.

Consequently, SEPTA created a Resource Management Review Group to make suggestions for improving law enforcement and cleanliness on the system. The group recommended that geographically adjoined train stations (zones) be the assigned responsibility of an identifiable supervisor.

As a result, SEPTA's two subway-elevated lines, the blue and the orange, were divided into seven zones. Four zones encompass the blue line's 28 stations, while the orange line's 24 stations make up three zones. A lieutenant heads each zone, which includes a sergeant and a contingent of uniformed patrol officers for each shift. The zone's crime rate dictates the number of officers assigned to each zone.

Improved Operations

With the implementation of the zone system, officers are now as-

signed regular beats that may include several stations within a zone. This allows them to work consistently with the same station personnel in their zones. As a result of the rapport that builds, station personnel often provide valuable information to the police concerning criminal activity, creating a unique bond between the police officers and station personnel.

In addition, police department employees have developed a sense of pride and ownership in their zones, because they have become responsible for one specific area. Officers are more familiar with their surroundings, with the passengers that use the system daily, and with the criminals who frequent the area. These officers form a close-knit group, dramatically reducing interpersonal conflicts among the zones.

SEPTA's new policing system also encourages supervisors to make decisions that upper management once made exclusively. Consequently, both supervisors and officers feel a sense of accountability in their attempts to contain crime in their respective zones. They now exhibit more concern and put forth a greater effort when faced with such problems as escalating crime. Rewards for productivity rather than fear of discipline govern their approach to their work.

Management further encourages officers to recommend ways of improving operations by scheduling periodic, informal "round table" discussions with administrative personnel. A different officer from each zone attends these meetings until all SEPTA officers have participated in the discussions. With all zones participating, administrators can see

how operations proceed throughout the entire department.

These discussions provide management with insights it cannot obtain from merely comparing computerized crime statistics. More importantly, officers perceive they are contributing to the success of the department when they can discuss and make recommendations to resolve problems.

The zone concept also brought administrative personnel in direct contact with officers on their beats. Consequently, officers feel that management is more in touch with what is happening on the street.

In the past, SEPTA police officers spent precious patrol time processing perpetrators for such offenses as smoking, disorderly conduct, fare evasion, and trespassing. Often, they spent 2 to 3 hours transporting offenders to a police district in order to complete paperwork.

SEPTA police officers now issue nontraffic summary citations to individuals who commit minor infractions on the system. The offenders are temporarily detained, paperwork completed on the spot, court dates provided, and citations issued in a number of minutes. The officers and offenders never leave the system, and the visibility of the police has increased dramatically.

The creation of a Security Agent Unit further increased the number of police officers on the system. Previously, officers patrolled the train and bus yards, as well as other SEPTA installations, while crime on public vehicles and at the stations escalated. Then, SEPTA started a program that placed former bus drivers, mechanics, and employees who were in-

jured and disqualified from previous occupations into the Security Agent Unit.

Agents complete a vocational rehabilitation program and serve as the eyes and ears of the police. They primarily work as armed security guards, protecting employees and property. They wear different uniforms than police officers and do not have powers of arrest. The nearly 80 agents in this program serve as effective deterrents to crime and allow SEPTA officers to patrol where they are needed most.

In addition, officers of the recently established Tactical Unit primarily patrol areas of the system that have suffered from an increase in criminal activity. These uniformed officers augment zone patrol

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officers and periodically work special plainclothes details. The K-9 Unit also supports zone operations and has contributed to the decrease in crime in specific areas on the system.

Area Revitalization

Implementation of the zone concept, and with it, the construction of new ministations, has enhanced officer morale and increased public support. But it has also led to changes within the community.

For example, one zone headquarters was previously a three-story stairwell that passengers used to gain access to the elevated line. After the stairwell had been closed for almost 20 years, SEPTA converted it into an innovative structure that resembles a turn-of-the-century police station and fits in well with the surrounding commercial establishments. Furthermore, neighbors acquired a new sense of security from having transit police in the midst of their business district, which previously suffered from severe crime problems.

COMMUNITY POLICING

Many police managers have found ways to implement community policing in their departments. The community policing philosophy reaffirms that crime prevention, not merely responding to calls for service, is a basic mission of the police.

Police departments prevent crime by having a visible police presence. Consequently, the trend in many urban areas across the country is to get officers out of their vehicles and placed on foot beats.

Transit police departments, SEPTA included, have always used this method. Transit officers have frequent contact with passengers, who often board daily at the same stations on their way to work, school, or home. In this respect, community policing plays a significant role in fostering a good relationship between transit police and the regular riders.

SEPTA's Community Programs

In order to reach out effectively to the ridership, SEPTA's community affairs personnel are often assigned from the uniformed ranks,

because they work closely with the general public and remain in tune with the pulse of the community. These officers perform regular patrol duties, as well as develop and implement SEPTA's many community-oriented programs.

One program, Operation Lifesaver, is a nationwide effort supported by the National Safety Council. Operation Lifesaver promotes safety in order to reduce deaths and injuries due to train and motor vehicle collisions and trespassing on railroad property.

Another unique program, appropriately named Adopt-A-Station, focuses on developing a partnership between SEPTA and the neighborhoods along the system. The goal of the program is to strengthen communications with the public and to enhance the environment that SEPTA and the community share. After "adopting" a station, the community provides valuable input to SEPTA so that the station continues to reflect or improve the climate of the neighborhood.¹

The Adopt-A-School Program permits SEPTA police officers and other SEPTA employees to assist primary and secondary school students by providing tutoring, classroom and assembly speakers, and tours of SEPTA installations. The program improves the students' academic skills and fosters their awareness of the working world, including productivity skills and the needs of the marketplace. Further, it shows SEPTA employees that a concern for the community contributes to the overall success of a busi-

ness enterprise. To date, SEPTA has "adopted" nine schools.²

SEPTA's Crime Prevention Programs

SEPTA offers several crime prevention programs to nursing homes, schools, churches, universities, and civic groups—almost any organization interested in a presentation. Group participation and role-playing are key elements of these informative presentations.

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The Mass Transit Safety Program informs audiences on how to avoid becoming victims of serious crime while riding the transit system. The Pickpocket Prevention Program highlights travel tips specifically designed to prevent patrons from becoming easy marks. In addition, because automobile thefts often occur in SEPTA's commuter parking lots, SEPTA conducts a program to advise patrons of inexpensive and commonsense methods to protect their automobiles.

SEPTA also implemented the Truancy Intervention Program (TIP) with the cooperation of the Philadelphia Board of Education and the Juvenile Aid Division of the

Philadelphia Police Department. SEPTA police officers who encounter school-aged children using the transit system during school hours take them into custody and transport them to designated school board locations. If the resulting investigation leads to criminal charges, SEPTA police officers transport the student to an appropriate police facility. If not, the child is taken back to school.

SEPTA police officers remove as many as 30 students from the system each day. Because many of these students have been known to commit crimes both on and off the system, TIP has successfully decreased crime in the community.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, the SEPTA Police Department's zone concept and other community policing programs have greatly affected the City of Philadelphia. Crime has decreased by 43 percent, and the surrounding communities and passengers who use the system have responded positively to SEPTA's efforts.

In addition, the satisfaction of SEPTA patrol officers plays an equally important role. They are the backbone of the department and ultimately responsible for the success of any law enforcement program. ♦

Endnotes

¹G. Hauge, J. Dorn, and N. Gargano, Police Group Report, SEPTA Resource Management Review Division, 1990.

²Adopt-A-School guidelines provided by the Philadelphia School District. Information on SEPTA community relations programs provided by the SEPTA Community Relations Staff, 1992.