

# Community Oriented Policing

Community Oriented Policing programs have grown rapidly across the country. Here's how some jurisdictions are using technology to make their COP programs more effective.

by [Justine Kavanaugh-Brown](#) / February 29, 1996

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Community Oriented Policing (COP) has been a rapidly growing trend in law enforcement for the past several years. This method of law enforcement -- vastly different from typical incident-oriented policing -- means officers are assigned to a neighborhood, usually one with high crime rates. Officers spend most of their time in their assigned area, where they get to know the residents and the environment.

COP encourages officers to form partnerships with the residents and work with them to prevent crime. Occasionally, police will even set up a local office in their assigned neighborhood and hold monthly meetings with the residents.

While many neighborhoods are implementing COP programs, their use of technology varies considerably. Some wouldn't think of doing the job without it, while others get along just fine doing things the traditional way. And whether technology is being used or not, most COP programs have proven to be successful in bringing communities together, reducing crime and giving citizens an added sense of security.

## COLUMBIA, S.C.

Jurisdictions that are using technology in their COP programs are choosing to do so in order to improve efficiency and enhance their information-dependent operations. Columbia, S.C., a city of 112,000, developed a sophisticated system that uses an integrated computer-aided dispatch system, mobile data terminals and message switching and routing tools to allow an exchange of information with state and national law enforcement databases.

Columbia's system is used primarily to collect, store, monitor and retrieve information needed by officers in the COP program. **Officers can quickly perform license plate and tag checks, produce tow slips if they tow a vehicle**, check on stolen property and do online incident and booking reports. The system also automatically captures shift activities to help produce the daily shift-ending reports. **[Police officers all over America are engaged in vehicle theft. They move stolen vehicles from one state to another, leave them on a side street for 30 days and the pick them up and sell them for pure profit. Hardly anyone knows about this program but if you are in any city with tow trucks, watch out for them sitting on corners and then mobilizing during the night.]**

"The incident reports and the booking reports are transferred electronically through a records management system so that we can get rid of as much paperwork as possible," said Ken Turner, computer services administrator for the Computer Services Division of the city of Columbia. "Normally, an officer fills out a form and then has to hand-key it into a computer later."

The system also helps officers sort data so they can present information to citizens in an easy-to-understand format at neighborhood meetings. "As they work with the public, they will be able to answer questions from them more quickly," said Turner. "If citizens ask a question about a particular incident, the officers can literally go to the laptops and pull up the report and let them know."

## MOBILE DATA

**Mobile data terminals in Columbia's patrol cars let officers transmit information back and forth without using two-way radio, dramatically reducing the probability that sensitive messages will be intercepted.** [Secret calls, secret activity, dealing drugs, organizing drug pickups and deliveries, organizing stalkers, stealing cars and nobody hears it.] "When a call comes in -- providing it's not high priority like a bank robbery or police officer shot -- we can just dispatch computer-to-car. It cuts down on the voice communication, and clears the air for more severe emergencies," said Turner. "At this point in time we don't know of any scanners that are able to pick up the digital data packets that we're communicating with. So people can't sit at home and listen to what went on at the neighbor's house like they can with voice communications."

Columbia is also putting together a Geographic Information System (GIS) that will be available for officers in the COP program early this year. Using GIS, officers will be able to plot criminal activity on an electronic map. Layers of information can then be added to the map to create a picture of crime trends in an area.

Turner expects the system to save 15,000 to 20,000 hours a year for officers and other personnel who normally have to hand-key various reports. "That gets the officer back on the street quicker and lets us reassign other personnel to where they're really needed," he said.

## HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY, FLA.

The Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office, located in Tampa, Fla., is the fourth largest sheriff's jurisdiction in the United States. The office is using a Community Oriented Policing System (COPS) for multiple applications and to help with their COP program, which expanded rapidly since it began a few years ago. Their system has enabled savings in manpower and has meant faster response times and improved investigative capabilities.

One unique way officers in Hillsborough County are using COPS is to develop a database of problems and solutions. "When an officer goes out on a call or comes up with a problem, he enters it into the database," said Mike Carroll, systems analyst for the Florida Department of Corrections. "In doing so, the officer captures information on the actual problem, information on the action taken, and a list of resources that were applied to the problem."

The next time someone comes up with a similar problem, they can search the database and get a report on everything that was done on that problem in the past. "Hopefully, this will be like a reference book that will help officers when they have a particular type of community problem. It will provide them with a whole list of different resources available to them, contact names and numbers, etc.," said Carroll.

Hillsborough County also uses a statistics program that keeps track of calls that require a police response. A list of the calls can then be run to identify areas where crime is happening most often and what times of the day it's most likely to occur. Officers can then step up their presence in those areas at those times.

## SHARING INFORMATION

Officers in Hillsborough County, like Columbia, have mobile digital terminals in their cars. In addition to using them to search for and store information, they are also developing an electronic mailbox system. Officers can send e-mail so the next officer on duty can call up the messages and read them. "This is important, because they don't always get a chance to talk, and there may be important information that needs to be shared between them," said Carroll.

An arrest notification system is also being developed that the county hopes to implement early this year. This will let officers know if certain suspects have been arrested and also notify them if a suspect has been the subject of another police inquiry. "If a deputy inquires on a name, and then another deputy later enters that name for another reason, the system will alert the second officer that someone else has inquired on that individual for one reason or another," explained Carroll. "So if they are both putting together pieces of the same puzzle, this will let them know, where previously they wouldn't have known and would just be duplicating their efforts."

Carroll said the system's overall goal is to help stop duplication of efforts and to get officers to share information so they are working together instead of separately. "We hope this will facilitate communication -- which seems to be the biggest problem that departments have."

For more information, contact  
the Columbia Police Dept. at  
803/733-8295, or the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office at 813/247-8291