Goldstein Award Submission

1. Summary

Using Community Education to Reduce Larcenies from Unlocked Vehicles

Between 2016 and 2018, the Albemarle County Police Department (ACPD) in Virginia experienced a dramatic increase in reported larcenies from vehicles. There was a 26.1% increase in 2016 and an 87.5% increase in 2017. Commanders of the police department made it a priority to decrease these numbers, as soon as possible. In July of 2017, the ACPD tasked the Problem Oriented Policing (P.O.P.) Team with reducing the amount of larcenies from vehicles.

The larcenies were a large quality of life issue for Albemarle County residents. The police department was the focus of negative comments on social media pages, and the larcenies were detracting from all of the positive activities being done in the community. In the case of larcenies from vehicles, the average citizen would identify the problem as criminals breaking into cars. The P.O.P. Team identified the problem as vehicle doors being unlocked, thus, creating the opportunity for would be thieves. With the citizens' own actions contributing to the crimes, how do you solve this problem?

After researching numerous Problem Oriented Policing guidebooks, and analyzing previous ACPD responses, the P.O.P. Team drafted a plan with the goal of a 20% reduction of larcenies from unlocked vehicles, by 2019. To accomplish the goal, the ACPD needed to improve partnerships within the communities, as well as within its own department. The plan took a holistic approach involving agencies and individuals from outside the law enforcement community. Community education was the primary focus of the plan, along with a combination of surveillance operations and saturation patrols. Key components of community education included more person to person contacts and an increase of the department's social media "footprint."

Right away, the ACPD was seeing results of their labor. Citizens seemed more aware of current crime trends and were more engaged on social media sites with press releases, mug shot photos, and direct messaging. The P.O.P. Team and detectives assigned to property crimes made numerous arrests and gained

invaluable information on the criminals and their accomplices committing the crimes. By the end of 2018, the ACPD reported a 16.7% decrease in larcenies from vehicles. Although the POP Team fell short of its initial goal, the new approach can easily be viewed as a success. With the assistance of the department's crime analyst, the P.O.P. Team continues to evaluate its strategies and make changes based on successes and failures.

2. Description

Overall, Albemarle County, Virginia is a safe place to live, work, and vacation. The 736 square-mile county nestled in the heart of central Virginia, with the City of Charlottesville located near its geographical center, has a relatively low crime rate. It is home to nearly 108,000 residents, with a temporary population that fluctuates with the enrollment of the University of Virginia.

Albemarle County is a fairly low crime community with property crimes being the most prominent, but traffic crashes cause the greatest concern. The Albemarle County Police Department has been focusing heavily on traffic safety and education for a number of years. Larcenies were always cyclical, with an increase before the winter holidays and again once school is out for the summer. Historically, groups of juveniles were found to be the culprits for the seasonal increases. Recently, however, there has been an inordinate amount of property crimes, largely focusing on larcenies from motor vehicles and stolen motor vehicles.   Between 2016 and 2018, the Albemarle County Police Department (ACPD) experienced a dramatic increase in reported larcenies from vehicles. There was a 26.1% increase in 2016 and an 87.5% increase in 2017 (Appendix Figure 1).   These were not the normal numbers department administrators and Albemarle citizens were used to experiencing.

Concerned citizens were calling 911 more frequently to report their neighbor's car alarm and interior lights on, or a series of car doors left open down an entire street. Victims were constantly calling after waking up in the morning to discover their car was rummaged through the previous night, or even worse, their car was stolen. In 2017 there were 74 vehicles stolen, up 21% from 2016 (Appendix Figure 2). As a consequence of the drastic increase of larcenies, officers had less opportunities for community engagement, traffic enforcement, and case follow-ups. Larcenies from vehicles quickly became the largest quality of life issue for county residents.

The ACPD's initial level of diagnosis focused on two crime types: stolen motor vehicles and larcenies from motor vehicles. While the ongoing problem likely stemmed from a group of juveniles, another individual with a different modus operandi (m.o.) was also operating in the area and thought to be responsible for the majority of the "smash and grab" larcenies from motor vehicles that occurred. Crime analysis was the primary method of trend identification with observation of the impacted areas and victim interviews used to establish the offenders' m.o. The analysts examined police reports for day of week and time of day trends, along with examinations of the items taken and the state of the vehicle (unlocked or locked) when the crime occurred. An analysis of percent change was completed, along with a threshold analysis to determine the scope of the problem and if the number of incidents were significantly higher than expected statistically. In additional to the analysis of the reports, the Problem Oriented Policing (P.O.P.) Team engaged in observations, interviews, and a thorough examination of the vehicles affected (including both those left at the scene and those recovered later). The P.O.P. Team also conducted environmental assessments following the CPTED model to determine if there were things in the target areas that could be changed to decrease the number of incidents.   Some of target areas assessed included shopping centers, apartment complexes, and residential neighborhoods.

Even though the environmental analysis showed poor lighting and a lack of opportunity for natural surveillance in most of the apartment complexes and neighborhoods, the P.O.P. Team determined that the underlying conditions of the problem stemmed from victims leaving their vehicles unlocked with valuables and keys to the vehicles left inside. The crime analysis portion of the study revealed nearly all of the larcenies from unlocked vehicles occurred in residential areas between 9PM and 6AM, with no specific day of the week. It was also determined that the "smash and grab" larcenies from locked vehicles were clustered around shopping centers and parks. Victims often left valuables in their vehicles while they were shopping or enjoying outdoor activities in the area.

The P.O.P. Team and the analyst learned that the ease and availability of vulnerable targets led to the significant increase in crime. They hypothesized that combatting this would have a substantial impact on the behavior of the offenders. The environmental factors appeared to have less of an impact than the availability of vulnerable targets. While the remoteness of the parks and the large number of targets at shopping centers were enticing to the suspects, removing the items of interest and the ease of accessibility would eliminate the available targets in those

areas. Quite simply, the ACPD needed people to lock their vehicles and remove valuables.

With the crime analyst providing up to date data, in combination with researching numerous websites and Problem Oriented Policing guides, the P.O.P. Team developed a new strategy and project goals. The main goal for the project was to have a 20% reduction in larcenies from vehicles by 2019, with a multi-pronged plan, focusing on community education, developed to address the suspects and victims of the crimes.

It became apparent the traditional methods of saturation patrols and arresting your way out of a problem were no longer going to work. As Barga et al. noted, "Relative to simply increasing police visibility and making additional arrests in crime hot spots, problem-oriented interventions that attempted to alter place characteristics and dynamics seem to produce larger crime prevention benefits."[i] The P.O.P. Team considered numerous factors, such as, practicality, cost, and potential effectiveness, when developing strategies and measures. Since the analysis of the problem revealed all of the vehicles that were stolen were unlocked (or spare key in adjacent unlocked vehicle) and the majority of larcenies were from unlocked vehicles, the strategies needed to change. Community awareness and education needed to be at the forefront, in combination with other known successful measures.

Some measures were not taken due to cost, proven effectiveness, and departmental support. For example, signs in neighborhoods and shopping centers advising visitors and tenants to lock their car doors and remove valuables were too expensive. The signs would have cost $30 for a small sign and $50 for a larger, more noticeable sign. With dozens of the different apartment complexes, shopping centers, and neighborhoods in Albemarle County, the cost would be too high for the ACPD to absorb. Most of the areas that needed the signs the most were not willing to pay for signage from their own budget. In addition to the cost, it has been shown that installing similar signs loses effectiveness quickly after tenants and customers drive past it daily. Similarly, Neighborhood Watch signs or other signs that warn would be offenders are not a significant deterrent.[ii]

Another measure that was not take was deploying a bait car since the ACPD's bait car had numerous issues and was not reliable. Borrowing the Virginia State Police's bait car was considered, however, there wasn't a current department policy

dictating its use. It would have taken too long to develop a policy and have its approval up the chain of command.   Since the department's bait car had so many issues, the P.O.P. Team made it a priority for the department to obtain a new bait car as soon as practical.

Distributing information flyers door to door or placing notices on unlocked were also considered, but not acted on. Delivering flyers door to door was not feasible due to department staffing issues and probable lack of return on investment if the department had to pay overtime for officer to do this. Although placing notices on unsecured vehicles or locked vehicles with valuables in plain sight has been effective[iii] many at the ACPD did not support the idea. It was seen as doing the work for the would-be criminals and marking all of the easy targets.

With the focus on community education, the ACPD needed to improve the way Albemarle County residents receive information from the police department. The police department's website was rarely visited and did not have current news and crime trends. To fix this, the entire county government began looking into new website options and meeting with developers to improve the overall look and user experience on Albemarle County sites. It will be a couple of years until a new platform goes online, so the ACPD began updating its page with more recent pictures and more useful links.

In another effort for the ACPD to improve its messaging with the community, the P.O.P. Team started a Nextdoor account and quickly became quite active on it (Nextdoor is essentially an online neighborhood watch). It allowed the department to send targeted messages to specific neighborhoods that were experiencing criminal activity and warn adjacent neighborhoods. As stated in the Crime Prevention Publicity Campaigns guide, "Publicity messages need to be relevant and offer specifics to the target audiences."[iv]

Although 43% of adult Americans get their news from social media, many still get it from traditional sources. For that reason, members of the P.O.P. Team conducted interviews with local newspapers, television and radio stations. During the interviews, officers would discuss crime prevention tips and the shocking increases in larcenies. With the help of the local radio conglomerate and funding from the Albemarle County Police Foundation, officers also recorded public safety announcements reminding citizens to lock their car doors and remove all valuables. The interviews and public safety announcements often ended with reminding

people to "like us" on Facebook and "follow us" on Twitter for the most up to date information.

The ACPD's social media sites were visited more frequently than its website, but its content was mostly traffic alerts. With most Americans getting their news from social media, it became clear the department needed to enhance its "digital footprint." According to the Pew Research Center, 43% of adults in the US get their news from Facebook, 21% from YouTube, 12% from Twitter, and 8% from Instagram[v] . Although active on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, the ratio of followers to residents showed the department's pages were underperforming. Smaller agencies locally with a third of the population of Albemarle County had higher following rates. Some police departments, like Rochester, New Hampshire, have more social media followers than they have residents. Departments with a high number of followers post content that is timely, funny, and engaging.

When the ACPD began posting more timely and engaging pictures and comments, the numbers went up dramatically. On Facebook the ACPD had an increase of 66% more users liking the page from July 2017 to January 2019 (Appendix Figure 3), and a 21% increase in Twitter followers during the same time period. This was likely due to better content. The posting of timely information, mug shots, information releases, and satirical and informative videos became more frequent. On Twitter, the ACPD continues to post the #9pmroutine. This is a reminder for Twitter followers to make sure their car and house doors are locked before they go to bed (Appendix Figure 4).

Another key aspect to community education is face to face contact with the citizens. Members of the P.O.P. Team increased the number of HOA meetings they attended, added more Community Safety Groups (formerly named Neighborhood Watch), and visited with apartment managers more frequently. Issues like personal safety, situational awareness, and recent crime trends were always hot topics. Once the neighborhood leaders were more informed, they were more likely to disseminate their new information to other neighbors and tenants. Many of the apartment managers would include this new information in their monthly newsletter, email, or attach it to the rent bill. "It is important for police agencies to be aware of their target audience's demographic composition. Publicity messages cannot be efficient if people cannot understand the basic content."[vi] In the county's predominately Hispanic neighborhoods, the managers attached a letter from the ACPD stated they will not be asked about their residency status when reporting a

crime. The letter was in English and Spanish, with the hope of building trust in the community, providing a better service, and gaining more accurate reporting of crimes.

Although the P.O.P. Team handled the majority of the community education approach, the rest of the department was crucial with implementing other responses. The Criminal Investigations Division, Patrol Division, School Resource Officers, and supervisors all worked seamlessly with the P.O.P. Team. Without the increased cooperation and communication between each division, the strategy could not be effective.

Patrol and investigations supervisors were able to allocate resources for saturation patrols and at times have officers on bikes. The dates and times were often specifically chosen by the crime analyst, based on predictive analysis and past criminal activity. Increased foot and bike patrols were found to be effective in reducing theft from cars, according to a study done by the Coral Springs Police Department.[vii]

In Virginia, pawn shops are required to record the identification of a person selling or trading items to the pawn shop. The detective assigned to all of the larcenies worked closely with the P.O.P. Team, sharing information back and forth. Both would often check the pawn database and review store surveillance footage. If there was possible suspect information, there would often be a coordinated effort to conduct surveillance on the suspect's last known address. Observation of the areas in which the suspects were previously reported to gather allowed the P.O.P. Team to identify groups of individuals that congregated together.

A break in the cases came from a convenience store surveillance video that provided pictures of one of the juveniles using a stolen credit card from a vehicle. In partnership with the department School Resource Officers, patrol officers, and detectives, the juvenile was identified and interviewed. During his interview, the juvenile provided valuable information that led to several detentions of other juveniles. Further, several victims identified juvenile suspects known to them. Additional interviews were conducted, and patterns of behavior were able to be established.

Once other suspects were identified and intelligence gained, detectives and the P.O.P Team obtained arrest warrants and search warrants for places of residence, and sometimes cell phones. Because the suspects were hitting targets so frequently, there was always a sense of urgency to execute the warrants. At times, the cell phone "pings" resulted in collaborated efforts with neighboring agencies that lead to the arrest of multiple suspects. The surveillance combined with intelligence gained provided leads that eventually led to the arrest of 19 suspects.

At the end of 2018, an assessment was completed to determine the impact of these efforts on the number of vehicle larceny and theft incidents that occurred in the county. Combining community input with the most updated numbers from the crime analysist, the P.O.P. Team evaluated the new approach. In 2018, the ACPD reported a 16.7% decrease in larcenies from vehicles and a 24.3% reduction of stolen vehicles. Although the goal of a 20% reduction of larcenies from vehicles was not reached, the new strategy was viewed as a success. Equally important, officer commendations (through the ACPD Office of Professional Standards) nearly doubled and negative comments of social media platforms decreased. The community responded positively to the social media campaigns, and members of the community are still engaging, retweeting, and sharing these messages to date.

Occasionally when there is a significant reduction of crime in an area, there are often unintended positive and negative consequences. A negative consequence can be the displacement of crime. If there is a heavy police presence in one area, criminals will often go to an area nearby to commit crimes.   The City of Charlottesville was unable to provide their statistics regarding larcenies from vehicles and stolen vehicles, but using Charlottesville's public crime mapping website Crime View, we determined there was a 1.2% reduction of larcenies from vehicles and an increase of 35.6% stolen vehicles in 2018.[viii]   These numbers present the question; was there a displacement of crime from Albemarle County into the City of Charlottesville, or is it due to other circumstances?

Currently, the ACPD continues to see a downward trend in larcenies. The strategy of using community education to reduce larcenies from vehicles is still in effect. The department continues to engage its citizens on social media with posts like the #9pmroutine. Applying the SARA model, researching past police responses, and improving partnerships within the community were instrumental to the overall success of the program.

[i] Braga, Papachristos, Hureau (2012)
[ii] Keister (2007)
[iii] Coral Springs Police Department (2003)
[iv] Barthe (2006)
[v] Pew Research Center (2018)
[vi] Barthe (2006)
[vii] Coral Springs Police Department (2003)
[viii] Crime View (2019)

3. Agency and Officer Information

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4. Appendices

Figure 1.

ACPD Larcenies from Motor Vehicles by Year
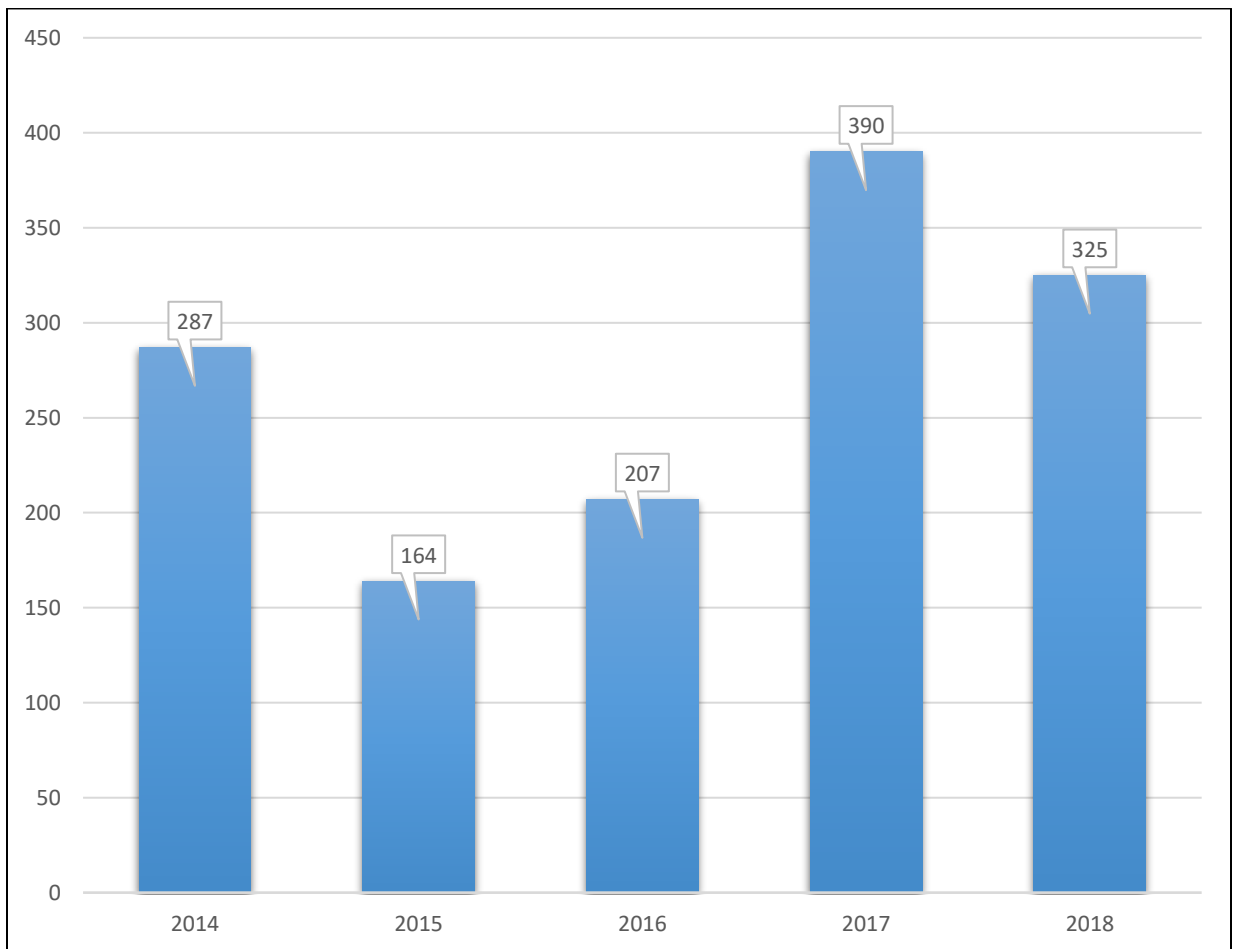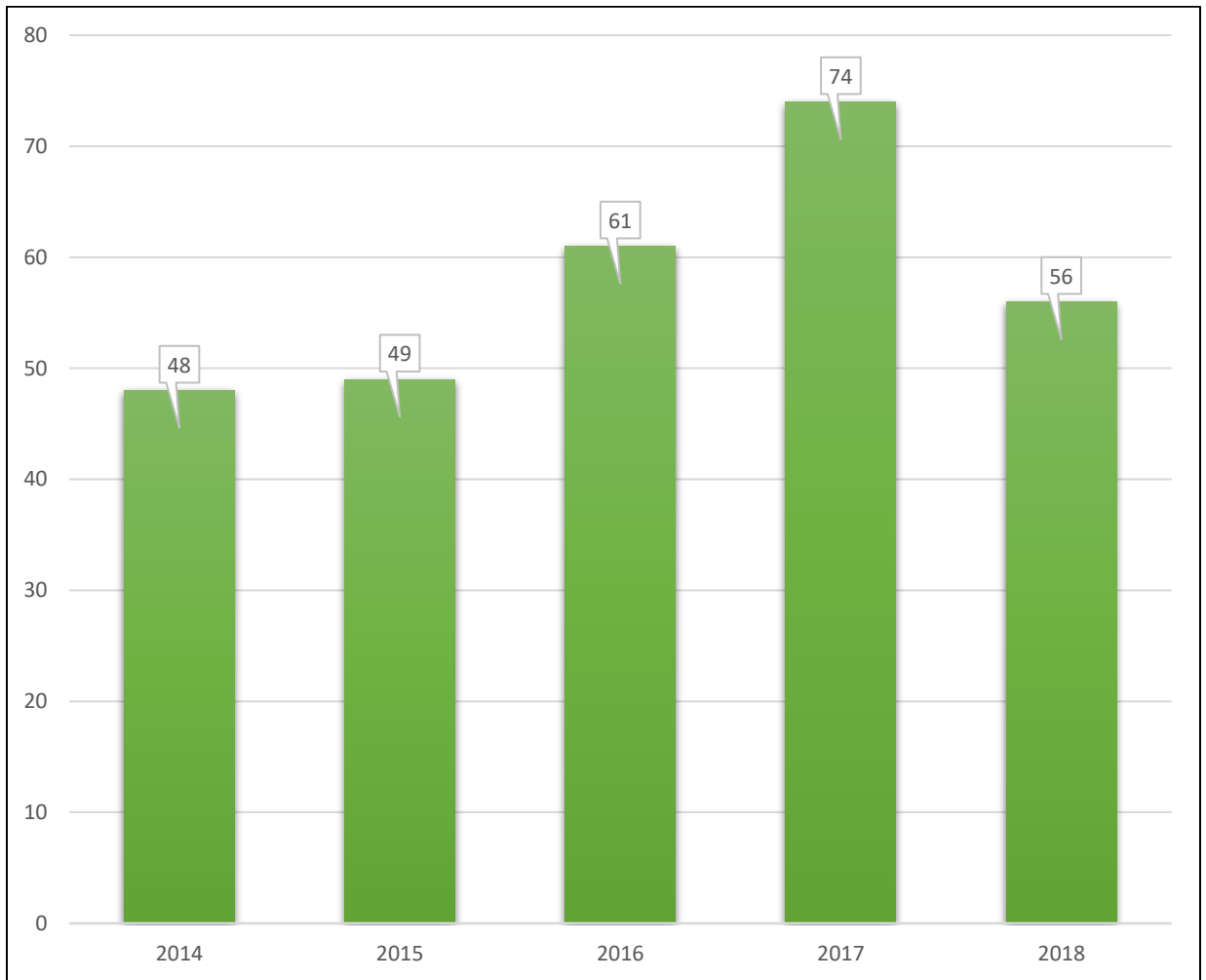
Figure 2.

ACPD Stolen Motor Vehicles by Year

Figure 3.

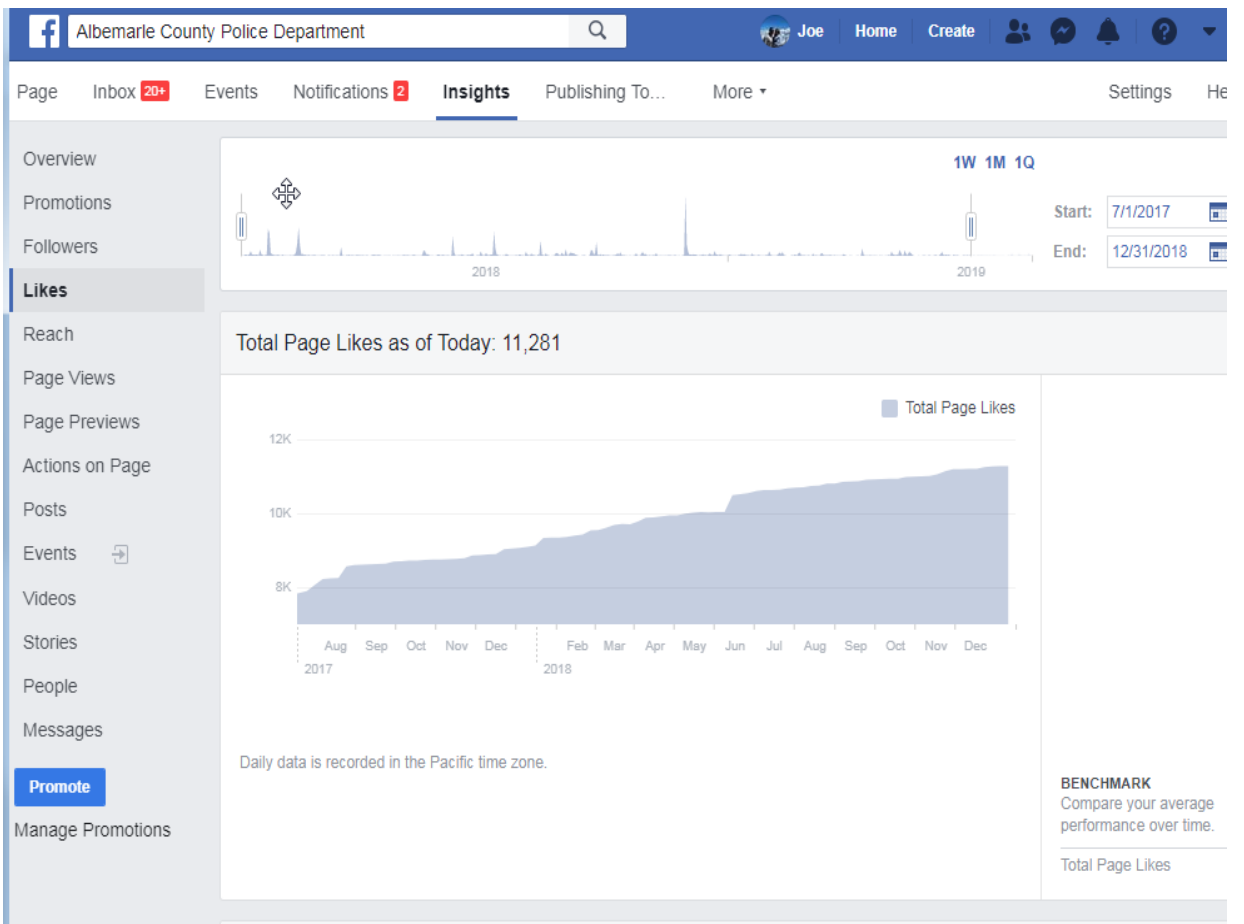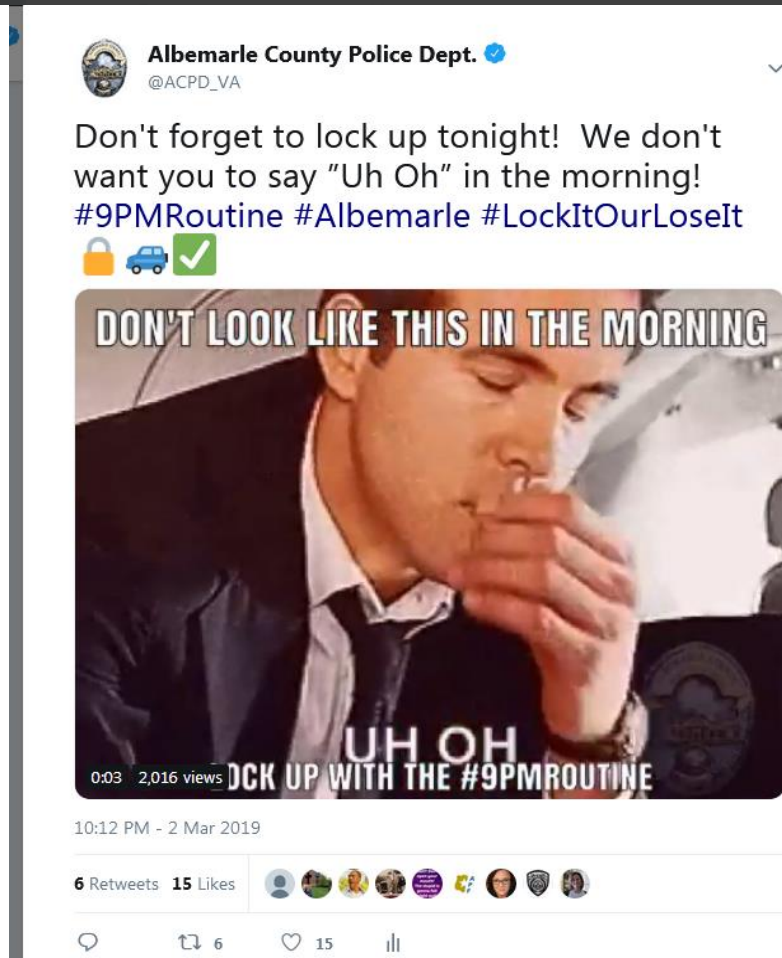<u>ACPD Facebook page followers from 7/17 – 1/19</u>
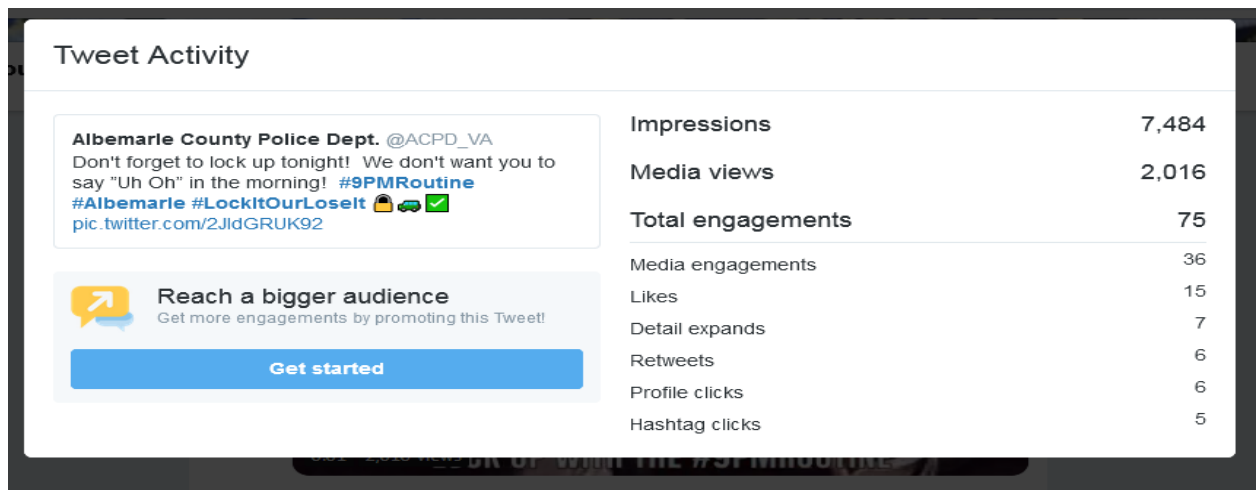
Figure 4.

Twitter Examples of the #9PM Routine with Impressions

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