

Community Policing: Success In Lowell



Partnership Is The Key To Our Success

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Safety First is a process designed to maximize and enhance the community's existing resources through the coordination of efforts. The effectiveness of Safety First is dependent on the commitment of local government, law enforcement, and the private sector, including the business community and the network of human service agencies to work with one another towards the goal of increased public safety.

Safety First efforts are facilitated by local leaders supported by the Crime and Justice Foundation (CJF). CJF staff help plan agendas, challenge participants, and work with local leaders to synthesize meeting content through debriefing and guidance. Actions at each meeting model power-sharing and participatory problem-solving. Efforts are goal oriented and specific.

The evolution of Safety First included a series of steps utilizing the components of the SARA model. Students from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard and staff from the CJF conducted comprehensive scanning through focus groups and data collection and analysis of existing incident and arrest reports of the police department and criminal history reviews of multiple offenders. The responses that were utilized were carefully crafted by reviewing the statistical and anecdotal data by the line staff who were executing the responses. The community - law enforcement, government and businesses - had input to the response development as well. The process of assessment has been ongoing allowing for both mid-course adjustments and evaluation.

The Safety First strategy provides experience with and facilitation of a process to reduce crime and improve the perception of public safety in the community. Safety First provides support to existing city leadership and community prevention efforts through:

- Enhancing collaborations and partnerships of citizens, government and the private sector
- Identifying community concerns and developing group goals with shared agendas, responsibility, planning and success
- Goal oriented meetings with articulated agendas guiding participants through a problem-solving process
- Using data and evaluation to improve problem-solving capacity and drive decisions
- Building on innovative strategies designed by local community groups and individuals to address local priorities
- Wide community impact - to improve the quality of community life

Safety First is a collaboration of local law enforcement, government, and state agencies and human service agencies - representatives from every level of each agency. It is broken into three working task forces: the juvenile, domestic and neighborhood initiatives.

A. Scanning

The city of Lowell, Massachusetts, a blue-collar working city located about 26 miles northwest of Boston, was faced with a problem that was similarly confronting communities across the country. An overall decrease in reported Part One crimes was being overshadowed by a flurry of violent assaults, most of them involving juveniles. Record reductions in property crimes were being dwarfed by the high-profile violent crimes that were capturing banner headlines in the local media. The resultant effect of the assaults was a negative impact on the public's perception of the city and the perception of crime and safety in the city. Businesses were migrating out of the downtown area. The distorted perceptions of the city were being created at a time when city leaders were preparing to embark upon the largest public relations and advertising campaign in the city's history. Clearly, something needed to be done, something beyond the belief that it was the responsibility of a police department to arrest criminals and single-handedly make the problem go away. At the same time, a direct and concerted effort was needed that would help reduce the levels of victimization.

Consultation between Frank Hartmann from the Kennedy School of Government and Lowell Police Superintendent Edward F. Davis, III led to the first step in addressing this problem: convening a group of high level people from multiple agencies that were impacted or could affect the safety or the climate of safety in the city of Lowell. A decision was made that the group would be pulled together by a "powerful neutral convener," somebody who was politically neutral and whose participation in the program would help establish a high level of credibility with the project. It was decided to enlist

the services of the publisher of the local newspaper, considered one of the most influential people in Greater Lowell.

At the group's initial meeting, they were provided with a broad agenda, to solicit their thoughts on how to impact crime and the feeling of safety in the city. Each stakeholder was asked to provide his or her own perspectives on what they saw as the biggest crime problems facing the community. Almost to a person, each member of the group identified violent assaults as the most prevalent problem.

With the working group having identified aggravated assaults as the number one problem facing the community, graduate students from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University were deployed to the Lowell Police Department and granted carte blanche access to police data. The students pored over hundreds of incident and arrest reports as well as court data for cases involving aggravated assaults. For the purposes of their analysis, the students considered only cases where a weapon was used or serious injuries resulted. Looking at a random five month period, the students and crime analysis personnel from the Lowell Police Department realized that about 52 percent of the 833 reported aggravated assaults during that period were domestic related, while 25 percent of the assaults were committed by and on young people up to the age of 21-

While the domestic violence facet would not be dismissed, it was decided that juvenile issues were more pressing and were responsible for creating a greater level of fear within the community. This was a crime that was much more public, occurring in the schools and on the streets of the city. Using the initial data research as a springboard,

in time specific initiatives to affect domestic violence and community disorder would evolve from this program, but the juvenile component was given top priority.

With the data in hand, the team established a goal to reduce the incidence of juvenile assaults by 30 percent within one year. With a set goal, the analysts who examined the aggravated assaults looked at a five-year criminal history prior to the assault, and a six-month period after the assault to identify any patterns. Analysis of the pre and post behavior helped provide not only patterns of behavior by the offender, but deficiencies within the system and necessary areas of response.

This was a problem identified with the input of community leaders and by a collection of agency leaders, including the mayor, the city manager, a congressman, the superintendent of schools, the district attorney, the presiding justice at Lowell District Court, the superintendent of schools, the chief probation officer, the commissioner of the Department of Youth Services, the publisher of the Lowell Sun newspaper, the Lowell Development Finance Corporation, and the Superintendent of Police. The Crime and Justice Foundation, a century-old, not-for profit organization with expertise in policy and research in the criminal justice field helped provide technical assistance.

The initial level of diagnosis was that a review was performed of all aggravated assaults reported to the Lowell Police Department during the five-month period. A conscious decision was made to specifically target the youthful offenders because it was believed that this was a very manageable problem. It was a very public problem, one that affected all aspects of the community from the youth to downtown dwellers and business owners. But it was also decided early on that the initiative needed to be one of real collaboration and dialogue with shared goals and agendas, not just the perfunctory

occasional updates of individual efforts. Thus was born the initiative that came to be known as Safety First.

B. Analysis

The number of juvenile assaults was a perennial problem in the city of Lowell, but one that was becoming more prevalent with the formation of several youth gangs who were responsible for an increasing number of violent crimes. In order to properly understand the nature of the crimes being committed, the student researchers reviewed all police department data such as incident and arrests reports and booking sheets, criminal histories, and they engaged in conversations with the line personnel of each component which comprised the Safety First working group.

This was a problem that offenders, victims, and for that matter, the entire community had the responsibility to properly address. Every agency had its own "escape blame" and "project blame" mechanisms. What we found from the conversations was that each organization was doing a very good job in its own area of responsibility, but other than sharing information, the groups had not established a continuum of services and care. Everyone needed to share in the responsibility to affect the problem. Schools sometimes knew a problem was brewing, but as long as children were dismissed from school safely in the afternoon, the school department felt the problem was solved. Cases were moving through the court quickly, so court personnel were pleased. The district attorney's office was compiling a satisfactory number of convictions. And the police were making their arrests.

Contemporaneous with our juvenile initiative, we also created a working group consisting of members of the community. We provided them with the similar data and input that had helped shape our agenda, and asked for their input and suggestions.

C. Response

It became apparent to the Safety First working group that we needed to create a method of communication and information dissemination that ensured both the top of the command staff and the people on the streets were obtaining the information they needed in a timely and usable fashion.

The response plan that evolved from our analysis was carefully crafted by the line personnel, with the support of their ultimate supervisor, who was a member of the Safety First working group. It was a combination of both raw data and anecdotal information from people who were impacted by the problem that would clearly make the greatest impact.

As previously stated, the intended accomplishment of the initiative was the reduction of juvenile assaults by 30 percent. Coupled with that would be the improved feeling of safety in and around the schools, our downtown, and neighborhoods.

To reiterate, since a small number of offenders was found to be responsible for a disproportionate amount of incidents, we decided to create a working list of 20 individuals who would be targeted for assistance. Most of the 20 teens were identified through our analysis as most likely to have committed repeat acts of violence or innate leaders of some of the city's gangs who were orchestrating the crimes. Each juvenile on this list was brought before a team consisting of members from each participating agency,

While it was difficult to initially implement, we have recently experienced great success with early probation conditions, particularly on disorder crimes such as tagging or property damage, minor incidents that would previously have been viewed as just that.

Prior to actually implementing our plan, there was a considerable amount of joint preparation needed. Specifically, there was a definite need to recognize our shared goals and agendas, and to carefully choreograph our steps with all of the participating agencies. We also knew there would be a consistent and ongoing review of data to effectively produce change.

Surprisingly, there were few difficulties encountered in our efforts. Those that did emerge were not insurmountable. There were some union issues within one of the member organizations. Some others expressed a desire for funding; something that was never a serious consideration within the initiative. From the outset, it was virtually a mandate that we not seek money to support our efforts. This was not about getting more money to do our job, it was about doing it better with what we already had. But perhaps the greatest obstacle we met was the slow understanding by the rank and file of some of the member groups. We soon realized a need to better communicate our strategy to the members of our groups who were not directly involved in the working group's agenda.

Representatives from each of the partner agencies on the Safety First working group were involved in providing resources and in the response to this problem. So too, were support systems brought in once the program was engaged, such as representatives from the churches, the Streetworker program, the Boys and Girls Clubs of Lowell, the YWCA, and members of three of the city's neighborhood associations. Technical

assistance and support from both the Crime and Justice Foundation and staff and students at the Kennedy School of Government was critical.

D. Assessment

As a result of Safety First, information collection and dissemination has now become a priority. A lieutenant on the Lowell Police Department has been appointed full-time Safety First coordinator, to facilitate all of the work that needs to be done by the juvenile, domestic violence, and community components of the program. Information is now collected from a variety of resources, brought to the Safety First task force, and disseminated in a timely fashion to the people who need it. Through the police department's crime analysis unit, information is now being gathered, processed and distributed in a user-friendly form. We found that the people who most needed to understand its value could not properly digest information that was too unwieldy. Key information is now distributed on a daily basis to all of the members of our working group.

Besides the aforementioned enforcement of probation conditions, an effort which has been directly coordinated by patrol officers and probation officers, the Department of Youth Services has increased its involvement in removing kids from the community who refuse efforts to help them rehabilitate. More and more of the gang members who continually find themselves in court are getting remanded to DYS custody faster. Likewise, judges are committing the offenders with warranted sentencing, and are imposing bail for gang members involved in a wide scope of incidents.

The relationships created at the levels of our task forces have been the catalyst for other things happening outside the initial purview of Safety First. Specifically, with the domestic violence task force, we have been able to identify holes in the delivery of service. With the direction of the domestic violence team, we crafted a federal grant application and received a \$361,000 award that will allow for the creation of a domestic violence information center and improved services to victims, children, and offenders.

In its first year, the highest priority of Safety First was realized with a 29 percent reduction of assaults committed by and on juveniles. Much of what Safety First has accomplished, however, is intangible and therefore unable to measure. How can you say that crimes that did not happen are a result of what we did? On numerous occasions, the Safety First network has developed information about the potential for a gang confrontation on a certain date or at a particular location. The mobilization of the Safety First team, with specific outreach aimed at juvenile probationers and identified gang members has had extremely high success rates, warding off numerous potential attacks. Our assessment of success, however, comes from the open communication and feedback loops that were established early on in the program. The headmaster of Lowell High School tells us that for the first time in years, the school year has gone nearly incident free, with little or need to call the police to defuse problems within the confines of the school.

¹ Interestingly, several of the service providers enlisted in the Safety First effort, such as Big Brother/Big Sister of Greater Lowell and the Boys and Girls Clubs reported an unusually high number of new participants, with heightened interest in work and education opportunities.

The neighborhood component identified three areas of the most pressing concern. One a small business district known as Cupples Square, two a small commercial development housing mostly Southeast Asian businesses, and the area in and around what is known as Clemente Park. For each of those neighbors identified the most glaring problems, soliciting feedback from other residents and professionals with knowledge of the areas.

Specifically, residents were concerned about double parking, traffic flow, meter feeding, trash, loitering, and lighting issues. Leveraging connections with the police department, the residents enlisted the business owners to assist in policing their areas. People were afraid to use the park because it was populated by males believed to be engaging in suspicious activities, such as gambling or weapons possession. The Safety First team facilitated the removal of bocce courts and a makeshift encampment that was erected around the courts. The park is now host to organized leagues as well as the return of families to the park and a dramatic improvement in aesthetics.

Under the auspices of Safety First, Police Superintendent Edward F. Davis III has vowed to try to make Lowell "the safest city of its size in the nation." With that edict, our crime analysis section performed a comparison of 62 cities nationwide that are of comparable size or population to Lowell. Using Uniform Crime Reporting data as the template of measure, the communities were rated based upon the total reported Part One Crimes. Based upon 1993 data, Lowell ranked 45th out of 62 possible communities in terms of Part One crimes, with 8,562 total crimes. In 1997, Lowell had risen to 15th place, with a reported total of 4,358 Part One crimes. The nationwide data for 1998 is not yet available.

Without a doubt, the most effective outcome of our Safety First initiative has been the recognition that this is not a one-time outing intended to temporarily affect crime and snare a few headlines in the media. In recent focus groups held to discuss the perception of Lowell held by outsiders, crime and the fear of crime were not even in the top five concerns people had. The police department has become a strong member of the city's marketing efforts. Home sales are up. Several new businesses have opened in the downtown section. But most significantly, besides the double-digit decreases seen in Part One crimes every year, violent assaults have seen similar drops. The change is dramatic. Dispelling fears of some members of the working group, Safety First proved to be more than a flash in the pan. Instead, it has become the way we do business in Lowell.

E. Agency and Officer Information

While at the outset, Safety First was comprised of the highest ranking members of each participating organization, the program has now been absorbed into each facet of the program, and is now understood and utilized from top down. At the police department's level of participation, several of the key players in Safety First have undergone extensive problem-oriented policing training. In particular, the current coordinator, Lt. Susan Siopes took part in a panel discussion at last year's POP conference in San Diego and has been one of the leaders in problem-solving for the Lowell Police Department.

All resources of all partners were in kind. No new monies were needed to support Safety First.

Reported Part I Crime in the City of Lowell
January- December
1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998

Year	Part I Crime	Violent Crime	Property Crime	Homicide	Rape	Robbery	Assault	Burglary	Larceny	Vehicle Theft
1993	9981	2650	7331	6	49	302	2293	2244	3126	1961
1994	8654	3094	5560	8	82	325	2679	1451	2553	1556
1995	8659	3939	4720	8	71	231	3629	1144	2445	1131
1996	5166	1447	3719	6	47	151	1243	820	1928	971
1997	4525	1203	3322	8	43	104	1048	697	1725	899
1998	4055	1090	2965	4	54	116	916	662	1379	924
% Change 93/94	-13.30%	16.80%	-24.20%	33.30%	67.40%	7.60%	16.80%	-35.30%	-18.30%	-20.70%
% Change 94/95	0.06%	27.30%	-15.10%	N/C	-13.40%	-28.90%	35.50%	-21.20%	-4.20%	-27.30%
% Change 95/96	-40.30%	-63.30%	21.20%	-25.00%	-33.80%	-34.60%	-65.80%	-28.30%	21.20%	-14.20%
% Change 96/97	-12.41%	-16.86%	-10.67%	33.33%	-8.51%	-31.12%	-15.69%	-15.00%	-10.53%	-7.42%
% Change 97/98	-10.39%	-9.39%	-10.75%	-50.00%	25.58%	11.54%	-12.60%	-5.02%	-20.06%	2.78%
1993-1998 Average	6840	2237.17	4602.83	6.67	57.67	204.83	1968	1169.67	2192.67	1240.33

Reported Part I Crime in the City of Lowell January- December, 1993-1998 By Year and Crime Type

