

**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

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**An Analysis of Compstat Management System
Principles Used by Small Police Agencies in Texas**

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ABSTRACT

The Compstat system combines aspects of modern crime analysis with the strategic management of police resources and tactics in an effort to prevent crimes. The adoption of the four core principles of Compstat; timely and accurate intelligence, effective tactics, rapid deployment, and relentless follow-up and assessment, have allowed many law enforcement jurisdictions to achieve dramatic decreases in the rate of crime in their communities. While many criminal justice professionals have studied and compared different Compstat programs, little attention has been devoted to its use by small police agencies. This project reviews a wide array of information and articles studying the effectiveness of Compstat principles and evaluates a survey of managers in small law enforcement agencies. The findings indicated that the Compstat system was being utilized by only a small minority of those sampled. Also revealed was the fact that a vast majority of the small agencies practiced or used many of the strategic management principles that are integral to Compstat programs in much larger departments. The organizational simplicity of small agencies allows strategic management with a less formal structure of implementation. As an organization grows and becomes more complex, a program such as Compstat may become necessary to define specific roles and assign accountability for meeting goals.

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INTRODUCTION

The Compstat system is a program combining crime analysis and strategic management of police resources and tactics. It was started by the New York Police Department (NYPD) in 1994 under Commissioner William Bratton. The NYPD set out to devise a system in which they could truly prevent crimes from occurring instead of just reacting to them. The Compstat system that was devised contains four core principles: timely and accurate intelligence, effective tactics, rapid deployment, and relentless follow-up and assessment.

The NYPD first ensured that their crime statistics were accurate and current. They had previously relied on crime numbers at least three to six months old. Current crime numbers were made readily available and that data was analyzed daily to spot trends and problem areas. Commanders were given full authority and responsibility for all resources in their assigned areas and given a mandate to not just displace the crime problems but to bring about permanent change through innovative strategies. Tactics were to be designed and quickly put into place and were continually compared to past efforts. Regular meetings were held in which the responsible commanders' efforts and results were scrutinized. Those commanders were rewarded or punished accordingly. After the implementation of Compstat in New York, crime rates there showed unprecedented decreases. While crime rates in the mid-1990s decreased nationwide, the rates in New York went down several times greater than the national average. The word got out, and numerous cities implemented Compstat or similar systems.

The purpose of this research is to determine whether or not Compstat is useful for smaller police agencies. Numerous agencies, large or small, may be eager to try the latest and greatest thing to serve their communities.

With a relatively new and successful program like Compstat there are numerous experts performing studies to determine if it really works and how it may work for others. Sources from several books, magazines, and journals will be reviewed for this study, the majority of which were written by law enforcement professionals who have in depth experience with Compstat. A written survey of a number of random small law enforcement agencies will be performed as well. The survey will seek to determine the level of knowledge of the Compstat system, any use of the program, the presence of Compstat management features, and the perception of the success or shortcomings of such efforts.

It is anticipated that the research will reveal that most small agencies will be familiar with Compstat although most will not be as acquainted with the strategic management component that is integral to the system. Most small agencies probably do not have the problems common to large departments where one branch does not know what the other is doing. Examination of small agencies should reveal that analysis of current crime data exists and resources are allocated to directly address those findings. Research should show that many small agencies already hold managers to some accountability for the success or failure of those efforts.

This research topic is important for police officers working in smaller agencies. As Compstat use continues to grow around the country, the successful programs will continue to receive publicity. Many department administrators looking for help in their

agencies will jump on the Compstat bandwagon in an effort to turn their program around. Some will attempt to emulate successful programs elsewhere rather than design something unique for their communities. A good number of them will be from small departments, and they may not realize that they already practice some of the principle features of Compstat.

In time, Compstat may prove to be one of the most important innovations in law enforcement. It can enable the police to quickly analyze crime in their area and may encourage them to develop innovative and effective strategies to combat it. Numerous small police departments are already utilizing methods that mirror some of the core principles of Compstat although it may not be recognized as such.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

One of the first tasks in evaluating Compstat is a true defining of what Compstat actually means. Walsh and Vito (2004) define Compstat as a “goal-oriented, strategic-management process that uses information technology, operational strategy, and managerial accountability to guide police operations” (p. 57). Some criminal justice professionals do not necessarily believe that Compstat is a new idea. Compstat may just be the coming together of good ideas: leadership, information management, accountability, and community-oriented policing action to solve problems (Firman, 2003). According to Schick (2004), Compstat is based on the values of maximizing every asset of the organization and each individual employee.

The original and still primary focus of Compstat and similar programs is crime reduction using four common principles: accurate and timely intelligence, effective tactics, rapid deployment, and relentless follow-up and assessment. In close relation

with these factors are accountability and discretion at all levels of the law enforcement agency (Shane, 2004b). The four distinct principles provide a roadmap to get police officers back into the game of proactively fighting crime rather than just reacting to it (Schick, 2004). Magers (2004) noted that Compstat principles are recognized for obtaining results when addressing complicated, serious crime problems.

After significant reductions in crime were attributed to the use of the Compstat system in New York, administrators from several large municipal agencies across the country took notice. Departments in Philadelphia, Baltimore, New Orleans, Seattle, Boston, and Los Angeles have instituted similar programs. Closer to home, several of the largest agencies in Texas have begun using Compstat including San Antonio, Dallas, Ft. Worth and Austin. Although there are many versions of Compstat, each is a system that identifies established and emerging crime trends for the efficient use of resources to target those trends (Schick, 2004).

Compstat was originally introduced to turn an agency around and to refocus its energies into fighting crime. Compstat requires that a department set clear goals or objectives that serve as priorities for the organization. Commanders and managers must be coached in developing innovative strategies to meet those objectives (McDonald, 2004). Schick (2004) reasoned that the Compstat model “calls for eliminating the risk aversion mentality, embracing change, and leading the organization back into the business of pro-active law enforcement” (p. 2).

Some have wondered if Compstat is in conflict with traditional community policing strategies. A Compstat-style system can work in departments with proven community policing structures in place. McDonald (2004) stated that Compstat, when applied

correctly, actually strengthens community policing. In the event of competition for available resources, precedence must be given to crime reduction efforts over community policing initiatives that only address quality of life issues (Hoover, 2004a).

Compstat programs vary significantly in the manner that they collect and analyze data of crime trends. Common to all programs is that the information is accurate and current. The number and level of categories that are measured varies from department to department. The only limiting factor in determining areas to be evaluated is the ability to set real and measurable goals. Once an agency sets objectives Compstat can be utilized to ensure that accountability is fixed and the desired results are achieved (Shane, 2004a).

A key component of the Compstat system is accountability for meeting crime reduction goals of the agency. Police commanders and managers must regularly report on the successes and failures of the strategies that they employ. Compstat establishes middle managers as the central actor in carrying out the organizational mission and holds them accountable for the actions of their subordinates (Weisburd, Mastrofski, McNally, Greenspan & Willis, 2003). Possibly the most vivid Compstat element is making operational commanders accountable for being aware of their command, knowing the problems, and achieving measurable outcomes (Willis, Mastrofski, Weisburd, & Greenspan, 2003). When William Bratton created the Compstat system for the NYPD, the primary feature was accountability of commanders for obtaining effective crime-reduction results (Magers, 2004). In the early days of Compstat, NYPD managers who did not have their heart in the new system were made to understand that it was time to retire or face demotion (Giuliani, 2002).

Compstat is not without its critics who seek to attribute dramatic decreases in the rates of some crime to other factors. A common theme speculates that commanders are manipulating data to reflect crime decreases or cooking the books (Kelling & Sousa, 2001, "The dark side of Compstat," 2005, and Treves, 2004). The confrontational nature of the Compstat meeting may have led some police managers to resort to falsification of numbers to avoid humiliation or embarrassment in front of peers and supervisors. Some suggest that confrontation is not a necessary part of the Compstat meeting (McDonald, 2004). Shane (2004a) contended that it is possible to be firm without being demeaning and to be critical without being insulting when holding commanders to task for results.

There is not universal agreement in the field of criminal justice regarding the utility of Compstat in law enforcement agencies of all sizes. Willis et al. (2003) states that the continual gathering, processing, and analysis of data that is integral to the Compstat process presents significant challenges to many departments, especially to small police departments with limited resources. Some hold the belief that small police agencies lack the resources or organizational complexity to implement a workable Compstat program (Weisburd, Mastrofski, Greenspan, & Willis, 2004). Still others feel the Compstat system would work in any size department, not just big cities. Using the process to develop crime reduction strategies allows agencies of all sizes to address emerging crime patterns and trends (McDonald, 2004). A Compstat program can be implemented in any size organization and any size department can benefit from the process (Schick, 2004 and Shane, 2004a).

METHODOLOGY

Recent study has shown that the advent of the Compstat process has been involved with significant crime decreases. Numerous law enforcement agencies, predominantly large metropolitan departments, have received publicity regarding their adoption of Compstat or similar systems. The focus of this research is an area that has thus far escaped serious scrutiny. Little is known about the use of the Compstat process among smaller departments or its measure of effectiveness if adopted. One particular study thought it reasonable to believe that agencies with fewer than 50 officers would not be able to properly implement Compstat and did not gather any data on such departments (Weisburd et al., 2004).

Research should reveal that small police agencies in Texas are not rushing to adopt Compstat programs at the rate of medium and large departments. The finite staffing and resources of small agencies would significantly limit the regular data collection and analysis that is necessary to keep such a system operating as intended. Small police agencies should not have the same management control problems of larger organizations. In fact many small agencies probably utilize many of the strategic management principles that the Compstat process calls for.

A component of this research includes a survey of leaders and command staff of small law enforcement agencies in Texas. The survey was limited to departments with fewer than 50 sworn officers. Included in the survey were questions regarding their department's use of a Compstat system and their use of several strategic management components inherent to the Compstat process.

The survey instrument was distributed to various departments in a variety of methods but predominantly by mail. Other department heads and managers were contacted in person and interviewed or provided a written survey. Still other department representatives were contacted by telephone and asked the specific survey questions.

There were a total of 35 surveys distributed to law enforcement agencies that employ fewer than 50 full time sworn officers. The survey instrument was distributed along with a cover letter asking that it be completed by the agency head or command staff and was accompanied by a postage paid return envelope. Of the total number of surveys sent, a total of 24 were returned for a response rate of 69 %. There is no known reason for failure to respond in the other cases and no follow-up was conducted. The completed surveys will be analyzed to determine the percentage of respondents who are utilizing Compstat and the presence of any of the various selected management components of the Compstat system in use by those agencies.

FINDINGS

To learn more about the adoption or use of the Compstat system among small law enforcement agencies in Texas, a written survey was used. Earlier research by Weisburd et al., (2004) included a survey 1,230 law enforcement agencies nationwide. In that study departments with fewer than 50 officers were not surveyed. As smaller agencies are the focus of this research, the survey in this project was distributed was distributed only to agencies employing fewer than 50 officers.

The survey instrument verified the type of agency, whether municipal police, sheriffs office, or other, as well as a verification of the number of officers in the agency. There were six other questions present in the survey that inquired about the presence or use

of selected strategic management principles that are integral to a Compstat program (see Table I). The presence of those principles is a recurring theme in the literature studying this subject.

Table I.

Survey of Texas Law Enforcement Agencies < 50 Sworn Officers (Based on 24 Respondents)	
Utilizes Compstat system	17%
Sets Measurable Goals and Objectives	75%
Manager Control over Resources	92%
Use Current Data to Measure Progress	83%
Manager Understanding/ Innovative Programs	92%
Regular Meetings to Assess Progress	100%
Use Data to Develop and Modify Strategies	88%

Analysis revealed that 17% of the responding agencies claimed to be using Compstat or a similar system of crime analysis and strategic management. The survey did not require any further elaboration on the particular system that these agencies had in place.

The remaining questions required only a positive or negative response on the presence or use of six key elements that are instrumental to the Compstat process. Those elements are not all inclusive but appear as common issues in successful Compstat systems already in place in other larger agencies. Of those factors the study revealed that those elements were being utilized by the small agencies at a rate ranging from 75-100%.

The first of these factors examined was setting of specific goals or objectives that lend themselves to being precisely measured. The objectives serve as a benchmark to evaluate progress toward crime reduction goals during the assessment phase of Compstat. Agencies representing 75% of the sample indicated that their department set such goals.

The small departments were asked if middle management in their agency were granted sufficient control over resources to meet set objectives. Such control is a key factor in devising effective tactics. Over 92% of the agencies indicated that managers were allotted this level of control.

The use of timely, current crime statistics was a key factor in the original implementation of Compstat. It allows the agency to employ the most prompt response possible to limit the effects of an emerging crime trend and up to date numbers are used to provide quick feedback on progress toward goals. The small agencies reported that 83% use current data in this manner.

Police agencies were asked if their managers were required to demonstrate knowledge of current crime patterns and develop strategies to confront them. Ninety-two percent of the respondents indicated that their department had such a requirement. Full knowledge of current crime trends and patterns is necessary for responsible managers to devise and execute effective tactics to confront them.

One of the most recognizable features of the Compstat system are the regular meetings to set goals, discuss trends, devise strategies, and assess progress. All responding agencies (100%) reported that they held regular meetings with commanders and managers to review and assess progress toward their expressed goals.

Innovation is yet another key part of a working Compstat model. Constant analysis of crime patterns requires continual updating of strategies to deal with them. Small agencies conveyed that 88% used current data in order to develop or modify strategies to deal with current criminal trends and patterns.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

Law enforcement agencies in this country are always looking for an edge in their constant struggle against crime. The emergence of the Compstat system is seen as one of the most innovative responses in recent years to aid them in their confrontation with crime. It has been adopted by a significant number of agencies already and even more are planning to start a program. Considering that Compstat was developed and first instituted in large agencies, little attention and study has been performed on the feasibility or need for such a program in small departments. Given the fact that an overwhelming majority of the law enforcement agencies in the state of Texas would be classified as small, this topic has significant relevance.

Although small agencies may be constrained by limited staffing and technical resources, they do not have the same management control problems of larger departments. Even without the adoption of a Compstat-model system it is likely that small agencies already practice many of the strategic management components that are inherent to the program and would not experience the corresponding positive results if they started one.

A random survey of small departments (fewer than 50 officers) revealed some (17%) had initiated a Compstat program. The agencies were also asked if they practiced some of the more important strategic management components of Compstat. The

responses indicated that the small agencies used these selected strategic management principles from 75% to 100% of the time. The results tend to support the belief that small police departments would not experience the same positive benefit as their larger counterparts from starting a Compstat program. A large majority of these small departments appear to be using current data to set objectives and develop tactics relating to crime reduction. The small agency managers and commanders are quite often given adequate control over resources and are responsible for understanding the problems in their jurisdiction. All responding agencies (100%) reported that they held regular meetings to assess their progress in reaching stated goals.

The literature reviewed for this project is divided since some researchers believed that Compstat was a workable solution for any size department while others felt it best suited for only medium and large agencies. Still others were hesitant to give Compstat credit for the significant reductions in crime where it has been adopted. The questions posed in the sampling of small police agencies seemed to support the stated hypothesis that small agencies are not adopting the Compstat process at significant rates. The survey also reveals that most of these agencies already have in place some of the most critical management components of Compstat.

There are significant limitations to this study that must be recognized prior to drawing any firm conclusions. Small departments compose the vast majority of law enforcement agencies in Texas and a larger sample must be reviewed to lend more credence to the findings. What has not been measured is the amount of influence that Compstat may have had in departments that are not using the system. Leaders and managers in these organizations may have chosen or selected Compstat management

principles without necessarily buying in to the whole program, in effect using some of the creativity and innovation called for in the Compstat model.

All society stands to benefit from the ability of its law enforcement officers to more effectively and efficiently fight the crime problems in their community. In many areas the emergence of Compstat has enabled them to do so. It has transformed some departments and allowed them to greatly expand their capabilities and shown positive results. Officers in small departments, while lacking the numbers, equipment, and resources of their urban counterparts, are still faced with crime, often at rates approaching or exceeding those in big cities. There is a need for research focused specifically on maximizing the potential of these small agencies. The leaders of these departments could benefit from a management model that considers the limitations they encounter daily in a small agency.

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Appendix 1

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Law Enforcement Agency Survey

Thank you for taking a few minutes to complete this survey. The survey is being issued as part of an administrative research paper being done for the Leadership Command College of the Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas. It is asked that the survey be completed by a management level staff member of your agency if not the chief administrator.

Type of Agency: _____ Municipal Police _____ Sheriffs Office
_____ Other (School District, Constable, etc.)

Number of Sworn Officers in Agency: _____ below 50 _____ 50-99 _____ 100 +

1. Does your agency utilize Compstat or a similar system of crime analysis and strategic management?
_____ Yes _____ No
2. Does your agency set specific goals or objectives that can be accurately measured?
_____ Yes _____ No
3. Does your agency grant middle management sufficient control over available resources to accomplish set objectives?
_____ Yes _____ No
4. Does your agency use current data to measure progress in meeting those objectives?
_____ Yes _____ No
5. Does your agency require that its managers understand current crime trends and patterns and develop plans/programs to address them?
_____ Yes _____ No

6. Does your agency hold regular meetings with managers/commanders to assess and review progress toward stated objectives?

_____ Yes _____ No

7. Does your agency use current data in the development or modification of specific strategies to address crime trends?

_____ Yes _____ No

Please feel free to include any comments to clarify above answers:

Thank you again for your participation in this survey. Please follow the attached instructions for return of the document.

David Collins
Huntsville Police Department