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The Use of Civilians in Traditional Law Enforcement Roles

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Abstract

With the changing economic times in Texas and the United States, police administrators are looking for ways to increase services while reducing costs. One way of accomplishing this goal is the expanded use of civilians in non-traditional roles. While civilians have always been a part of the police departments, their roles are expanding in departments all over the state.

In order to determine the potential impact on police services in Texas, this research centered on two main areas. First was the use of civilians as call takers, both on the phone and in the field. Second were that of criminal investigators, and the possible cost savings of using civilians in these roles.

Twenty-one departments were surveyed on the use of civilians in expanded roles. Follow-up interviews were conducted and the policies of agencies using civilians were reviewed. Two departments have started allowing civilians to go out into the field and take reports on property type non in-progress calls. Other departments have started hiring civilians trained as investigators, to do follow-up investigations in certain areas of expertise, such as family violence. Cost comparisons were made in the departments surveyed. Civilians can be hired and trained quicker while making less money than a sworn officer. This may allow departments to increase personnel with a smaller impact on payroll and budgets.

While the use of civilians in expanded roles is still in the early stages the potential cost savings and increased customer service make this an option that all departments should consider.

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Introduction

In the current economy with so much money and employment opportunities available in today's job market, police departments are increasingly looking for ways to do more with less officers, while saving tax payer money. Departments across the state are trying to cope with increased job openings that are more and more difficult to fill with a shrinking applicant pool. Departments are forced to look at creative ways to provide the type of service the citizen's demand with fewer resources. One of the ways departments are coping is with the increased use of civilians in traditional law enforcement roles. Some of these roles include report taking and investigations as well as the traditional roles of call taking and dispatching.

Some departments have started using civilians to take non- violent, property type crimes that police officers would normally handle. Having civilians take these types of reports frees up police officers to handle in-progress or violent type crimes. Other departments are using civilians for follow-up investigations, again freeing up detectives for other cases that need investigation.

This paper will exam two different aspects of the use of civilians in non-traditional roles in law enforcement. First it will look at the types of positions that are suitable for civilian personnel. The second goal will be to determine if the use of civilians in an expanded capacity is a cost effective method of providing services.

This paper will use previous reports on the use of civilians in law enforcement as well as other articles. The main focus will come from the use of surveys of departments

that are using this approach in the agencies. This research will look at the type of calls the civilians take or the type of investigations they handle as well as the cost difference in using civilians instead of officers.

It is hypothesized that the use of civilians can have a positive effect on law enforcement by freeing up police officers for other duties. This will provide better customer service to the citizens by having quicker response times to their calls. Also that there will be a cost savings to the department and the tax payers by hiring civilians at lower rates than police officers.

In the current economy of Texas and the United States police departments are looking for ways to provide better service with fewer people. If departments continue the use of civilians and broaden their use it could have wide ranging effects on law enforcement. While it can probably provide better customer service and lower costs there could be objections from police associations and unions as they see a threat to their jobs. While the use of civilians may increase there will always be a place for police officers to be on the streets dealing with the violent, in-progress calls and traffic problems.

Review of Literature

The search for ways to make law enforcement more efficient and cost productive is not a new one. One of the methods used to accomplish this task was the use of civilians to support and supplement sworn personnel. The first mention of the use of civilians was in the President's Crime Commission of 1967 (Pannell 1995). This was in response to the urban police crisis of the 1960's. The first use of civilians in law enforcement started in the late 1970's and early 1980's. Prior to that, sworn officers performed almost all duties in a police department including dispatch and phone answering. There were very few civilians working in police departments.

James Hennessy (1976) surveyed sixteen police departments. It was found that all sixteen were using civilians in some fashion. Hennessy stated that personnel costs accounted for ninety percent of the budgets of these departments and that cost savings could be made by using civilian personnel to take over some of the duties being done by police officers. At that time civilians were limited to the areas of administration, parking control, crime scene investigations, and crime analysis. Hennessy listed four benefits to the use of civilians: 1) dollar savings; 2) greater availability of sworn personnel for law enforcement work; 3) increased specialization applied to particular tasks and 4) increased productivity.

Another researcher, Robert L. Snow (1989) supported the use of civilians in law enforcement. Snow expanded on several advantages to using civilians. The first was cost savings. The fact that civilian personnel are paid less and have fewer benefits would cut down on personnel costs for a police department. The second area was in allowing more patrol officers to be used in direct policing. By having civilians take on many of the

non-direct duties, more officers can be used for patrol work to answer in-progress and violent type calls. Another benefit Snow listed was productivity. If a person is hired for a specific job and has training for that job, the person is more productive and does better work. Snow also talked about not having civilians promoted out of their jobs, which is what happens with police officers. An officer working in narcotics who gets promoted to sergeant would then be moved to patrol to start over, losing all that experience in narcotic investigations. Civilians are hired for a specific job and stay in that job in the department. And lastly, Snow thought that the civilian positions could serve as an intern program by allowing people interested in law enforcement to work at a police department with police officers, to determine their true desire to become a police officer. Many of these people would become officers but some would decide that that was not the direction they wanted to move in their career.

There was some disagreement on this issue. George Greisinger (1976) wrote a rebuttal to Hennessy. Greisinger argued that hiring additional non-sworn personnel then transferring officers' back to patrol would not reduce salary costs because there would then be more employees than before the civilians were hired. Greisinger called the move to civilianization gimmickry and less than responsible personnel management.

Phillip Gregg (1976) established two interpretations for the use of civilians in law enforcement. He argued that police departments could approach civilianization in two different ways. The first way was to replace officers with civilians in areas such as dispatching or administration. This would allow departments to save money on salaries by replacing those positions with lower paid civilians. The second way was to

supplement patrol, freeing up officers for field duty instead of doing away with the officers positions. This would increase overall expenses; but would also increase the number of officers on the street, which would help improve police services and citizen satisfaction.

In the mid 1980's police departments began experimenting with what was called Differential Police Responses or DPR. This was an attempt to find alternate methods of taking reports as opposed to always sending a police officer. Some of the methods tried included mail-in reports, telephone reports, and civilian call takers. In 1986 the department of Justice published research from three different police departments using alternate methods of report taking (McEwen, Conners, Cohen, 1986). The three departments were Toledo, Garden Grove, and Greensboro. In all three cities there was a sizable reduction in the number of non-emergency calls handled by immediate dispatch of mobile units. Also the goal of increasing the amount of time available for patrol units to devote to crime prevention and directed patrol was achieved in all three cities. In Garden Grove, the report showed a 40% increase in the number of officer initiated reports taken as a result of DPR. The study also showed benefits for the civilians, call takers were better educated, had higher retention levels, and were hired at lower costs than sworn officers. Another side benefit stated was that officer satisfaction with the call takers increased with the DPR. In Greensboro, they used civilians as evidence technicians to handle calls such as burglary, vandalism, and theft. These technicians would respond to the scene, take the report, and process the scene. In this study the technicians handled

18% of the non-mobile responses. A citizen satisfaction survey was also done in all three cities. Some of the results showed that citizens were willing to wait a little longer for property type crimes and were satisfied with the response. The satisfaction was directly related to what the callers were told when they called in to the police department. If they were told how long it would be for the response they were willing to wait the time. The least preferred method was to mail in reports. The study also concluded that using alternative methods could save costs. For example, a 4-person phone unit could handle the same number of calls that would take ten mobile units. Overall this study showed many more advantages to the use of civilian call takers than disadvantages in all three cities in the study, and all three cities went on to implement some or all of the alternate call taking systems.

In 1995 the International Association of Chiefs of Police published a Concepts and Issues paper addressing the hiring and screening of civilian personnel. Some of the suggestions made by the paper were that departments do a task analysis and create job descriptions before hiring personnel, showing the education, knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for each job. They also suggested that since some civilian personnel will be vital to the support mission, agencies should require the highest standard for these employees, by following the same basic hiring guidelines used for sworn personnel. Police departments should also insure that they provide these employees with adequate training, both before starting work and in-service training on a regular basis. And they also stated that while the criteria may be different, civilian personnel should be subject to same level of performance evaluations used for sworn personnel.

Methodology

The research questions in this paper will be two-fold. The first question is in what capacities can civilians be used in police departments. The second part of the question is to determine if the use of civilians in expanded capacities is a cost effective method of providing police services. It is believed that using civilians in expanded roles in police departments will provide several benefits to the department as well as to the citizens. These benefits include freeing up police officers to perform more patrol type functions, by relieving them of duties that can be performed by civilians. In addition, the use of civilians may provide quicker response time to calls by having more officers on the street as well as providing other quicker ways to report crimes such as phone and mail reports. This should also provide cost savings to the police departments, in that civilians are paid less and can be hired and trained quicker than sworn personnel, while providing a higher degree of service to the citizens.

To answer these questions a variety of methods were used. The first was a review of literature of other research on this subject. This review has shown some of the history on the use of civilians and some of the different approaches used by police departments. A written survey was also conducted at the Leadership Command College class #45 in September 2000. The officers in attendance at the college were surveyed to determine which departments used civilians in non-traditional roles. There were twenty-one different police agencies represented in the class. All twenty-one departments returned the survey. Of those twenty-one departments, four reported using civilians in non-traditional roles. Officers from the departments that

stated they used civilians were re-contacted for further information. Also reviewed were job descriptions or standard operating procedures from these departments to determine the nature of the duties performed by these civilians. These job descriptions were compared with the others collected to look for similarities, as well as the differences in the approaches to using civilians, based on the size and goals of the departments reviewed. Cost comparisons were also used to determine the cost effectiveness by comparing the cost of sworn personnel to civilian personnel performing duties that could be performed by sworn personnel, such as report taking.

Findings

Of the twenty-one agencies surveyed only four had used civilians in non-traditional roles that would fall under the topic of this paper. Two other departments Waco PD and Arlington PD were also found to use civilians in one of these roles. Two departments Temple and Austin used civilians as report takers both inside and outside the police department.

In Austin civilians are used as Property Crime Technicians. These Technicians are assigned the task of investigating and reporting property type crimes not requiring the immediate response of a police officer (Austin PD). Their duties include taking reports from citizens as well as processing the crime scene for evidence. Austin also uses Crime Scene Specialists to process major crime scenes. These are two different units within the Austin Police Department.

The Temple Police Department (2000) uses a position known as Community Service Technicians. These civilians are assigned the task of answering the incoming switchboard, as well as taking phone reports and taking calls in the field. In Temple the civilians are now taking many reports over the phone on such crimes as theft, criminal mischief, and even some burglaries that do not have a crime scene to process. The technicians take phone reports as well as mail-in reports. The technicians started taking reports in the field in April of 2001. In the first two months five CST's handled one hundred and thirty reports both on the phone and in the field. The most effective use of the technicians is in the area of phone reports. Many reports that are called into the police department do not require a police response and can be handled on the phone. This keeps patrol officers from having

To respond and take time out of their patrol duties to write property crime reports. This also provides fast response to the citizen since his report is taken as soon as he calls. This eliminates the inconvenience of waiting for an officer to respond.

Waco PD also used civilians to take calls and report. These civilians are called Teleserve Operators. According to the Waco PD General Order (2000) these operators are to handle walk-in and telephone reports of crimes that do not require a police officer. There are restrictions on the type of calls that Teleserve operators can handle. This was true for all the cities surveyed. These operators do not go out into the field as they do in Austin and Temple.

In Grand Prairie Police Department they have a civilian investigator position with the title of Police Civilian Investigator. The job description of this investigator reads the same as any other police investigator. They review reports, do follow up investigations, interview witnesses, do line ups, prepare cases for court, and testify in court as needed (Grand Prairie 2000). This is a good example of hiring people with special knowledge or education into a specific area. The qualifications for this position include education in criminal justice as well as experience working in the criminal justice field. Individuals hired for this position are required to have specialized knowledge, which reduces the amount of initial training required. In the case of most police investigators, they come from the patrol section, and they may or may not have the education needed to start right away with little or no training. The civilian investigators in Grand Prairie work specialized areas such as family violence and runaways. Grand Prairie as with most police departments is short of officers

in all sections of the department. The department has created these civilian spots to take some of the workload from the police officers while they attempt to fill all the vacancies in civil service positions; these are additional positions not replacing police officer positions. David Griesnger (Personal communication January 2001), the local police officers association president stated that while they did not like having non-sworn personnel working in the same jobs, they were also concerned about the shortage of officers. Grand Prairie like most departments today has shortages of officers that they have a hard time filling. As a result the detectives at the department do have to carry a bigger caseload. Overall, the feeling was that as long as there was no attempt to eliminate existing police positions that the civilians could help take some of the burden.

In Arlington they also used civilian investigators. The situation was the same as in Grand Prairie; they were short officers and could not get more officers into investigations. The civilians are a supplement to the police; no sworn positions have been eliminated. According to Jerry Carroll (Personal communication February 2 2001) Arlington's experience is the same as Grand Prairie. The civilians are assigned to special areas and do almost all the same duties with certain restrictions on what duties they can perform, such as not interviewing suspects alone (Arlington P.D.).

In all the departments surveyed the civilian employee earned less money than the sworn police officer while doing some of the same type of work. The savings ranged from \$6,300-\$9,900 per year per employee. Most of the departments only had a few civilian employees in these positions so the cost savings would not be that large, but by

expanding the number of civilian employees while not increasing the number of officers, the cities may be able to provide an increased level of service with a minimal increase in salaries. The following figures show the pay difference for those departments that use civilians as call takers and those that use civilians as investigators.

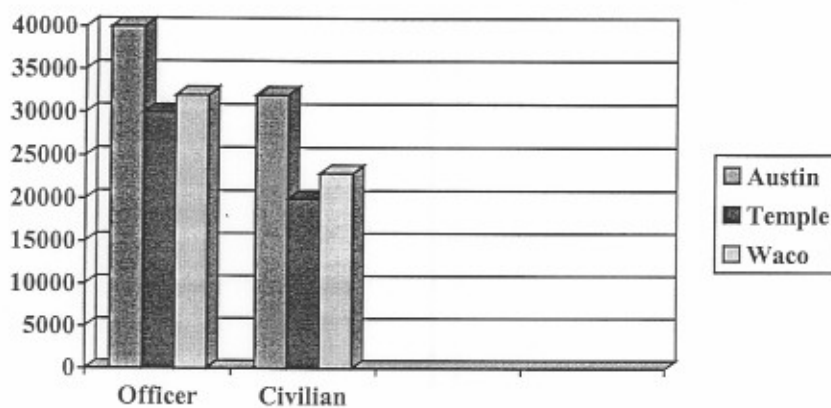


Figure 1. Salary comparison of civilian call takers and sworn officers

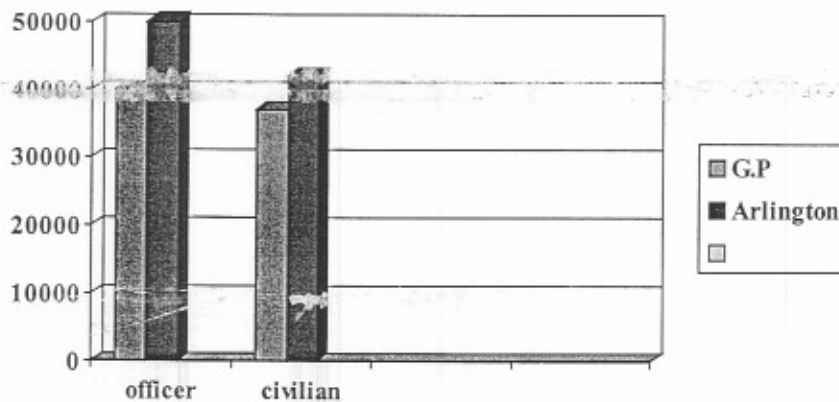


Figure 2. Salary comparison of civilian and sworn Investigators

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to determine the capacities of the use of civilians in non-traditional roles in today's police departments. In addition to determining if the cities could realize cost savings from using civilians in expanded roles. It was hypothesized that civilians could be used in a number of non-traditional roles within police departments, including answering calls for service, taking reports, and follow-up investigations. It was further hypothesized that this could be done while providing increased customer service and reducing costs.

A survey of twenty-one police departments was conducted. Follow-up interviews were conducted with those departments that used civilians in the roles being researched. Several trends emerged quickly. There were two main uses of civilians that were noted. The first was the use of civilians as call takers. In many departments today there are call takers who take reports from citizens on the phone. There was also some use of mail-in reports as well.

However there is a trend toward civilians responding to take calls for service on property type crimes. The two departments that were looked at were Austin and Temple. Austin probably uses civilians more than the other departments studied. In Austin the civilians go out in the field to take reports and process crime scenes. While other police departments around the country use civilians as crime scene workers that was not one of the areas this paper covered. In Temple the use of civilians to take phone reports is not new but they have started toward the goal of having the civilians go out into the field and take reports.

The second trend that emerged was the use of civilians in follow-up investigations. Some departments have begun to hire civilian investigators to supplement police officers. So far these civilians have been limited to the type of crimes that they can investigate. These civilians are used to supplement police departments that are having trouble keeping their departments fully staffed. As a supplement to the police officers these civilians seem to be accepted by the officers as long as there is not attempt by the department to eliminate police officer positions.

Cost savings and response times were also examined. With regards to the cost savings a comparison between the police officers and civilians performing the same functions in these cities was included. There was a significant difference in pay between the officers and civilians, with the civilians being paid less. It should be noted that there were very few civilians in these positions. Given the small number of civilians the effect on the budget would be minimal. However, to increase the use of civilians would have an impact of budgets of police departments in the future.

In regards to the response time issue, most of the benefits in this area come from telephone reports. The citizen can call when it is convenient for him to call and have the report taken immediately. There is no waiting for a police officer to come to the scene. In the few cases where a citizen wanted to have an officer come to the scene the citizen would have to wait the extra time for an officer to be dispatched to the scene. Also in departments where civilians respond to calls they can respond in the same quick time since they have no other duties such as patrol.

The findings of this research do show that the use of civilians in expanded roles in police departments can have a positive impact on the departments as well as the citizens served. By providing the citizen with alternative ways to report crimes to the police it is hoped that customer satisfaction will increase and patrol officers can be freed to answer calls that require a police officer.

This research was narrowed to two types of uses of civilians in non-traditional roles, call takers and investigations, as well as related cost savings. A much broader sample would be needed to assess the full impact of civilianization on Texas law enforcement in other areas not covered in this research.

In slow economic periods attracting and hiring new police officers is not difficult due to the job stability of police work. But in good times the lack of people looking for police work can cause severe shortages of personnel. However the citizens are still going to expect the same level of service from their police departments. The use of civilians may have a far-reaching impact on how police departments meet the challenge of dwindling personnel and the need to maintain or increase services. Almost any police department in this country could find themselves looking at these options in the near future and may need to understand how other departments have confronted this issue.

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