The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas

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Using Social Media to
Strengthen Community Policing
And The Department

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By
Paul Robeson

Tyler Police Department
Tyler, Texas
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ABSTRACT

Police agencies are facing changing times which are creating difficulties in managing their image, relationships, and recruiting among other things. As budgets are continuously trimmed down, agencies are finding difficulties when it comes to branding and recruiting. Citizens expect more from their agencies which often places a strain on police resources. Police managers must find ways to resolve the conflict of the public desiring a highly accountable and more involved agency with budgetary constraints.

One of the simplest and most cost-efficient solutions is the use of social media. Social media, specifically Facebook, use grows every day. On June 27, 2017, CEO of Facebook Mark Zuckerberg announced that they had exceeded two billion users (Nowak, 2017). This means that about one out of every three to four people worldwide are members of Facebook.

Social media allows for instant dissemination of information worldwide. Police agencies should use this free media source to their advantage. Utilizing social media allows the community to have direct access to the agencies through two-way communication. In addition to providing communication, social media allows the agencies to create a positive brand. Increasing branding will also increase recruitment because of the desire to become part of that agency.

Social media is the future for society. That future also includes police agencies. Social media is a cost-effective means for reaching the public. It provides for open communication and helps build a better relationship. It can also help to find more applicants for departments. For these reasons, social media should not be ignored.

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INTRODUCTION

Crime has been part of society since Cain killed Abel as recorded in the Bible (Genesis 4:8 NASB). Since then, society has tried to find ways to eliminate crime through different models. Community policing is a model that was developed so that policing would become more than just reactive to crimes. Instead, it "encourages agencies to proactively develop solutions to the immediate underlying conditions contributing to public safety problems" (Community Oriented Policing Services, n.d., p. 3). Community policing is a partnership between the police and the community for the purpose of identifying and working to solve problems the community faces (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 1994).

Law enforcement as a public organization is often forced to make changes based on society's demands. Departments often must change, and these changes are usually either because society demands a change for the agency or so that the department can overcome financial burdens (Duffee & Maguire, 2007).   Community policing requires a relationship between the community and law enforcement. The relationship must be built on trust. A Bureau of Justice Assistance (1994) report states, "a foundation of trust will allow police to form close relationships with the community that will produce solid achievements" (p. vii). Unlike other policing models, community policing requires "scrutiny of the police by the public", thus increasing the "accountability of the police to the public" (Barlow & Barlow, 2000, 44).

Once the relationship between law enforcement and society is established, the next step is to work as a team to stop criminal activities through problem solving. Community Oriented Policing Services (n.d.) defines problem solving as "the process of

engaging in the proactive and systematic examination of identified problems to develop and evaluate effective responses" (p. 3). Instead of police solely responding to crime after it has occurred, police and society work together to identify the root of the problem (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 1994). Herman Goldstein is credited as developing the original approach to solving crime proactively. He coined the term "problem oriented policing" and believed that police should focus on "responses that are preventative in nature" instead of reactionary (Center for Problem-Oriented Policing, n.d., para. 1). The model was expanded in 1987 by Eck and Spelman's SARA model. SARA is an acronym for scanning, analysis, response, and assessment (Center for Evidenced-Based Crime Policy, n.d.).

As society changes, law enforcement should also change. Research indicates that since 2005, the percentage of adults using social media has increased (Pew 2017). Pew Research Center found in 2005, five percent of US adults were using at least one social media site (Appendix A). In 2016, the amount had risen to 69%. Facebook continued to be the most used social media site, as almost 70% adults are now members (Pew, 2017). In June of 2017, Facebook announced that they had more than two billion users (Nowak, 2017). This research suggests that the number of adults using the internet and social media as at least one source of information will continue to grow.

Social media can have positive effects for law enforcement. It can improve the community policing relationship. It will also allow for more people to be reached as well as with more dissemination of information. Finally, it will help to build positive

departmental branding. Law enforcement agencies should use social media to strengthen community policing and the department.

POSITION

Just as Goldstein, Eck and Spelman concluded in 1987 that policing needed to change its practices; law enforcement is currently at another turning point (Center for Problem-Oriented Policing, n.d.; Center for Evidenced-Based Crime Policy, n.d.). Social media and mobile information has become part of many, if not most, American's daily routine. In 2011, 35% of US adults owned a smartphone; less than 10% owned a tablet (Pew, 2017). By the year 2016, 77% owned a smartphone and 51% owned a tablet. In 2016, almost 90% of Americans were online compared to 52% in 2000 (Pew, 2017). This trend is expected to continue to grow.

Social media has become a vital part of society's communication network. It is also become important for building the community policing relationship. Social media is quickly becoming the means to which more Americans receive news and information. In 2014, Anderson and Caumont through the Pew Research Center found that 30% of the general public received news from Facebook. In addition, research shows that half of social media users shared news articles and 46% discussed news articles. In 2013, Mitchell, Kiley, Gottfried, and Guskin through the Pew Research Center had a different survey to find out what types of news people were looking for on Facebook. Participates could select several choices from multiple categories. They found that 65% were interested in community events and 51% were interested in crime topics. Local government was also important to them at 44% (Mitchell et al., 2013) (Appendix B).

When the data is broken down by age groups, millennials (born 1980-1995) are largely getting their information from social media. The American Press Institute conducted research in 2013 and found that "88% of millennials get news from Facebook regularly, and more than half of them do so daily" (para. 10). In 2016, Greenwood, Perrin, and Duggan found that 84% of online adults ages 30-49 and 72% of those ages 50-64 used Facebook. Education, income, and location add little to no discrepancy to the data. It can be concluded that part of every group, no matter how they are divided, is getting at least some news information from social media.

Much of the law enforcement related news that the public receives is second hand from media sources and not directly from the departments. For the police and the public to have a good relationship, the public must trust that law enforcement is ethical and that officers have integrity. Community policing is also a relationship that must be built on trust. In fact, the foundation of any relationship is trust. There are books, articles, and other documents that teach this concept. Bryan Tracy (n.d.) is quoted as saying, "All relationships are ultimately based on trust" (para. 14). This is not limited to only romantic relationships. It is true for all good relationships.

Although people are using social media for news information, they have a limited trust in mass media. The trust level of media has slowly dropped from a high of 55% in 1999 to the lowest of 40% in 2015 (Riffkin, 2015, Appendix E). Even with this lowering of trust, people are still reviewing news stories in one way or another. Pew Research reports that 55% of people are receiving news alerts through their smartphones with 47% clicking on those news links (Lu & Matsa, 2016). There is a lot of information sent

out over the internet and cellphone networks and it is quickly received. It is literally in the palms of people's hands.

When law enforcement uses social media as a communication tool, more people are reached and better lines of communication are opened. Bryan Tracy (n.d.) also says that communication is another important factor in healthy relationships. Although research indicates that people get news from multiple sources, it also reveals that radio and newspapers as sources are declining (Gross, 2010). In the past, people have merely come across news stories by happenstance. They would then purposely follow up with those stories to learn more. This process has not stopped or changed. However, because of the blasts of news reports through electronic means, people are more likely to follow up with the stories online versus waiting for the story to appear on television, radio, or newsprint. This is especially true with millennials who reported reviewing news articles online at a daily rate of 69% or multiple times per day at 40% (American Press Institute, 2013). Sometimes these news outlets twist information and/or sensationalize it for unknown purposes.

Relying on word of mouth or a television news report can no longer be the only avenue for dissemination of information. Facebook and Twitter have become the top online mediums for getting information. A simple tweet or # (hashtag) can instantly reach thousands to millions of people almost in an instant. One of the main factors in reaching people is learning to use the proper hashtag for the situation. A properly designated hashtag will allow for more followers to view the communication (Kall, 2011).

Social media is an outlet that law enforcement should use for getting information or news out to the public. With more than three out of four American adults owning

smartphones, it is very easy for breaking news to be reported by want-to-be news reporters (Pew, 2017). A simple smartphone video recording can be posted to a social media site for the world to make their own assessment of the situation. Police will usually have more reliable and valid information about a case than most of the public. Often, there is some form of police video, whether dash camera or body camera, showing firsthand information of a scene. A hot topic for police is determining when they should release body camera videos (LA Times, 2016). Departments should decide before events happen what the policy will be for releasing video and/or statements.

Building communication through multiple avenues, including social media, also leads to positive branding through open two-way communication. According to Barlow and Barlow (2000), "Community policing is image-management policing. Evaluations of community policing often concentrate on the public's image of the police" (p. 45). Today, social media has become part of how the police's image is viewed and maintained. DeMers (2014a) writes that "a cross-channel strategy" should be implemented to reach the audience in different ways (para. 6). It is important to use email, blogs, social media, and other outlets because different content and mediums will reach various audiences. In a market that is always evolving the goal is to increase the positive visibility of the department (DeMers, 2014a).

While it is true that social media is not only option of news distribution; it should not be over looked. One of the main reasons is because research shows that when people are engaged in a social media sites like Facebook or Twitter, the department will "enjoy higher loyalty from their (followers). Every blog post, image, video, or comment shared is a chance for someone to react" (DeMers, 2014b, para. 6). People will react

and share posts and tweets. Therefore, it is important to get the correct information out quickly and to multiple outlets. Positive branding will help to combat the negative posts.

Sending out information to citizens often will also demonstrate openness (DeMers, 2014b). Social media is a way for people to provide feedback to a department. This may require a change of departmental thought. However, as the department name becomes branded, more people will begin to follow. The more people that follow, the more that the department will be talked about. As the department is talked about, the brand will become more solid and more reputable to attract new followers. People will be attracted to the brand because it has a positive rating (DeMers, 2014b). The cycle will continue as long as the department continues to post positive information.

Another reason to build a positive brand is that it attracts new employees. Law enforcement agencies across the United States struggle to find qualified applicants. In 2015, Pegues conducted an interview with Philadelphia Police Commissioner Charles Ramsey who said, "relatively low pay and tougher application requirements, combined with high profile police incidents from Cincinnati to Baltimore to Ferguson, are having a negative impact" (para. 3). The good news is, "departments with a reputation as being progressive are able to more easily attract top candidates than agencies with a poor reputation" (Orrick, 2008, p. 27).

Finally, positive branding can create an environment for increasing moral within the agency. As employees become more emotionally attached to the organization, their pride increases (Skinner, 2010). As Orrick (2008) states, "Officers know they are part of something special" (p. 27). Departments should take opportunities to highlight

examples of great officer service to the community. This should be completed through internal memos but also through social media (Orrick, 2009).

These are just a few of the reasons why law enforcement should use social media to strengthen community policing and the department. Social media does not seem to be disappearing; but, there may be changes in the future. The departments must be prepared to adapt for those possible changes.

COUNTER POSITION

One of the biggest misconceptions departments must address is the belief that the public will have an increased fear of crime because of the increased news on social media. This same fear was faced when television and newspapers reported on crime in the 1970s and 1980s. Gerbner and Gross (1976) even postulated that television would produce a fear of crime because it fictionalizes crime at a higher level than it occurs. Other research indicated that people have a fear of crime for places other than their own neighborhoods. It was not clear if age, education, or other demographic had any effects on their beliefs (Saad, 2011, Appendix D). Finally, the idea of an "anchoring effect" may play a role because usually only the most violent crimes are reported, even when less violent crime occurs much more frequently (Heath & Gilbert, 1996).

It is important to address what the fear of crime means and how this affects law enforcement. Fear of crime is an emotion and feeling based belief. However, it influences citizen's lives. It can cause people to be afraid to go outside of their homes, fear retaliation for reporting crimes, and seriously hurt their quality of life among other problems. When people do not leave their homes, this can subsequently hurt local

businesses. As the economy begins to fall, businesses may begin to leave (Cordner, 2008).

Although the fear of crime should remain an important concern, research shows that fear remains about the same from one year to the next. A Gallup poll from 2011, proved that the fear of crime as remained about the same for many years (Saad, 2011). From 2003 to 2011, 65% believed that crime was increasing, 19% said it was decreasing, and about 16% said that it was about the same. The polls indicate that these have had little variation over the past 20 years (Appendix C). This is also true for the belief that crime occurs in places other than their area. Since 2001, the belief that crime happens in other areas has remained at almost consistently 40% higher than in their own areas (Saad, 2011) (Appendix D). The evidence indicates that fear will not increase just because of the departmental use of social media.

Instead of being concerned about how the fear of crime is affected by social media, departments should focus on the effects of mass media negative headlines. Law enforcement has suffered from mass media editorial biases through sensationalism and selective reporting of information. This makes it even more important for the departments to distribute news directly to the community through multiple mediums including social media webpages. Departments have a choice to address sensationalism or to allow the branding to deteriorate.

The other major hurdle to overcome is the fear that using social media will take too much time and resources. After all, evidence points that departments and business should use multiple social media platforms to get information out to the public (Torres,

2014). The thought maybe that it will require a full-time job in addition to the public

information officer. However, research refutes this claim.

Kusinitz (2014) wrote "over 84% of participants found that increased traffic

occurred with as little as 6 hours per week invested in social media marketing" (p. 2).

Essentially this breaks down to one hour and fifteen minutes per day. However, the

reality is that is much less than this. Departments are already communicating with

television and print news media. Social media is an extra step that require an easy step

of copying and pasting onto those pages.

Although there are legitimate concerns, there is good evidence to counteract

them.   There may also be a thought that too much information may be released or that

it may be too difficult to control. However, these are simply controlled through policy

and review of potential posts.

RECOMMENDATION

It is time for law enforcement to begin using social media to strengthen the

relationship with the community. For now, social media and online sources continue to

grow in popularity. Dutta (2010) wrote in the *Harvard Business Review* that only 19 of

the top 50 CEOs were on Facebook, which was concerning even in 2010.

Dutta (2010) writes about the three reasons that leaders must accept and begin

using social media. These reasons do not just apply to individuals. It applies to

business and law enforcement as well. The first reason is that it provides a cost

effective foundation to build a positive brand. Secondly, it allows for rapid

communication with world. And finally, it allows for two-way communication and an

avenue for feedback from the community (Dutta, 2010).

Open communication is one of the most important pieces of a good relationship. Trust is the other major part. Social media facilitates both of these pieces of a relationship at a cost-effective level. This is important because departments need to create a positive brand and social media is the new source.

A difficult decision departments may face with social media is deciding which one to use. The answer to this dilemma is that they should use multiple social media sites. Facebook and Twitter remain as the top two services in 2016, and they should both be utilized. Pinterest, LinkedIn and Instagram also need to be considered because they have continued to grow in popularity. Most of the adults who are on social media are using two or more of the services. When multiple sources are used, there is a potential to connect with more people (Pew, 2017).

Another interesting fact about social media is that it is used by every group of people. Zipkin (2014) found that age, education, men, and women are all using social media. Over 60% reported that they used Facebook at least once per day. Twitter was reported by 46% as being used daily. Another study by Pew Research in 2017, confirmed that these percentages remain strong. These stats are important to remember when building a positive department brand.

A positive department brand is crucial to department survival in several different ways. The first is that it helps during the negative times. Law enforcement has become highly scrutinized and publicized during the last 10 years. There needs to be positive information about departments in the public conversations. The positives will help counteract negative events when they occur. A positive brand builds trust with the community.

The second benefit is that it can recruit new employees while keeping current employees. When people see a positively branded department, they will want to become part of the action. More people applying will increase the likelihood of finding the right people. It can be very difficult for law enforcement to find qualified candidates. Recruiting has always been a challenge. In 1933, Stone wrote "that men of particular ability, character, and training are badly needed in the police service" (p. 997). These people of character are who law enforcement is still looking for today.

After the department comprehends the need to use social media, it is important to take the next step. Within a few minutes, a department can create a Facebook page or Twitter account. It is preferred to use a media trained public information officer (PIO) to control the posts the social media site. If the PIO does not understand social media, it is important to work alongside of someone who has familiarity with them. It is also recommended to have a system in place that requires two-person approval before posting anything. This will help prevent too much information, misinterpreted information, or other problems. A policy may need to be created to help prevent these issues as well. After the social media site is created, it is important to review the security and control settings. Finally, it is important to let the employees know about the page. Encourage them to follow the page and share posts. This will initiate the growth of the page.

One of the worst things law enforcement can do to hurt their branding is to ignore social media. There are many positive effects of social media that include: cost effective, ease of communication, and increased community policing. Social media does not appear to be going away any time soon. Something else may appear at a

later time and become the next trend. However, for the moment, law enforcement should embrace social media.

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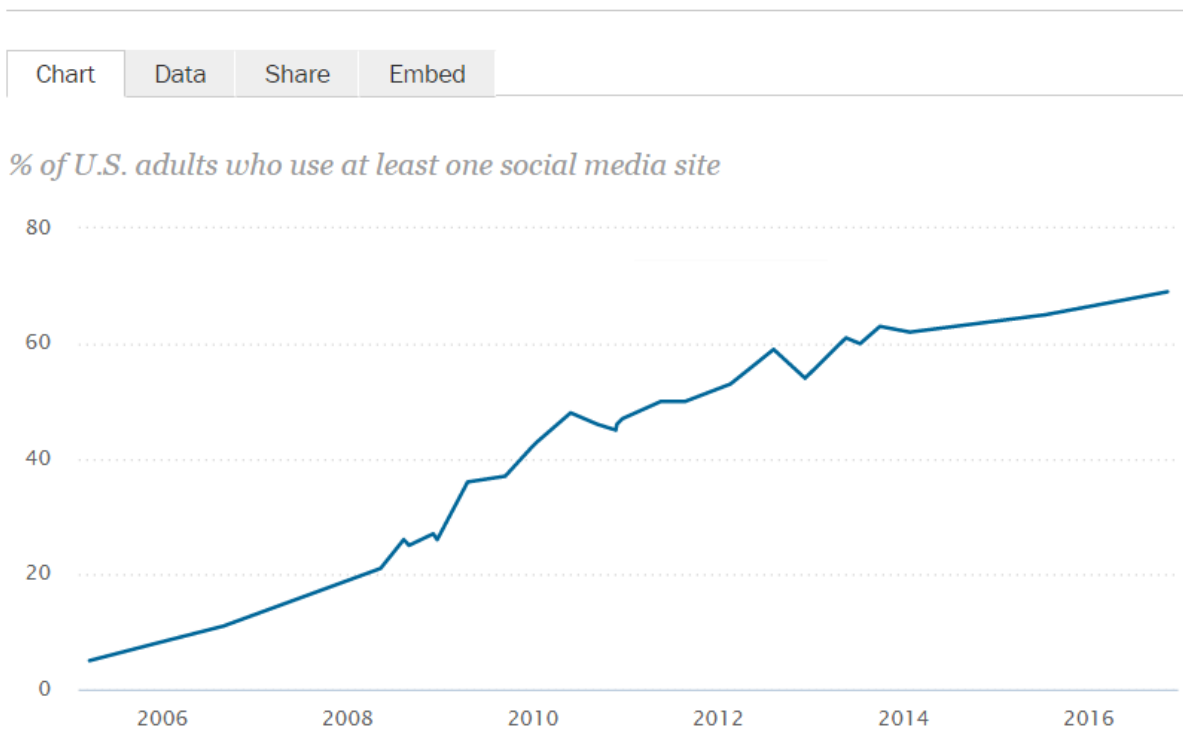
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Appendix A

Chart | Data | Share | Embed

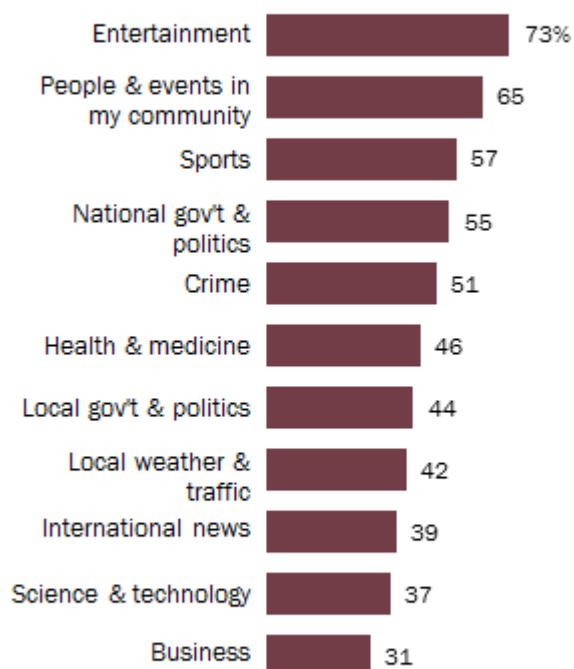*% of U.S. adults who use at least one social media site*

Source: Surveys conducted 2005-2016.

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Appendix B

Kinds of News on Facebook

*Percent of Facebook News Consumers who Regularly
See News on Facebook about...*

Category	Percent
Entertainment	73%
People & events in my community	65
Sports	57
National gov't & politics	55
Crime	51
Health & medicine	46
Local gov't & politics	44
Local weather & traffic	42
International news	39
Science & technology	37
Business	31

Based on Facebook News Consumers N=1,429
Facebook News Survey Aug. 21-Sept. 2, 2013.

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Appendix C

Perceptions of Trend in Crime Problem Nationally -- 1989-2011

Is there more crime in the U.S. than there was a year ago, or less?
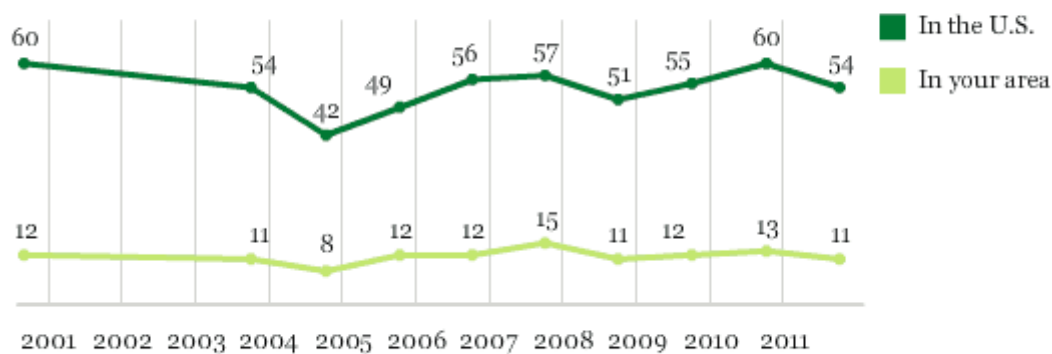

■ % More
■ % Less
■ % Same (vol.)
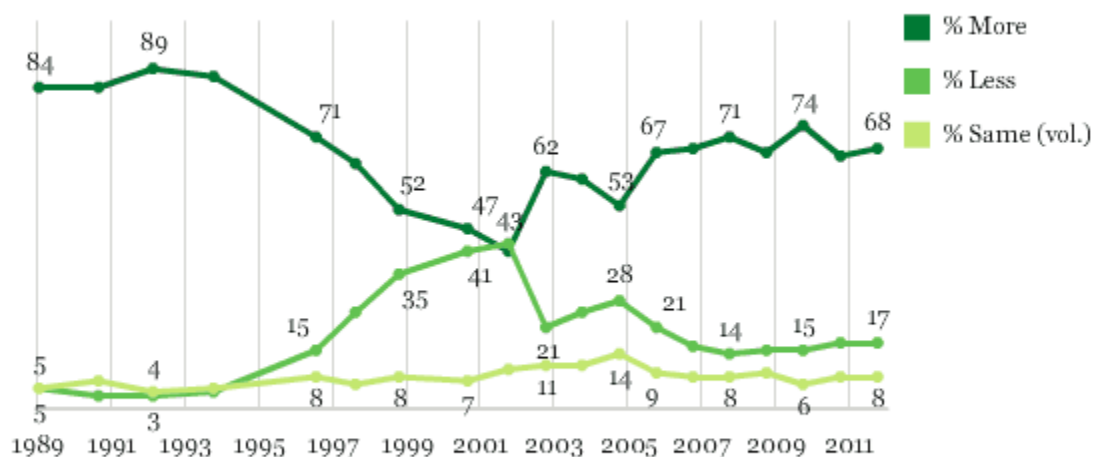
(vol.) = Volunteered response

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Appendix D

Percentage Rating Crime Problem as Extremely/Very Serious

Overall, how would you describe the problem of crime [in the United States/in the area where you live] -- is it extremely serious, very serious, moderately serious, not too serious, or not serious at all?

■ In the U.S.
■ In your area

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Appendix E

Americans' Trust in the Mass Media

In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media -- such as newspapers, TV and radio -- when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly -- a great deal, a fair amount, not very much or none at all?

█ % Great deal/Fair amount

Gallup trend since 1997

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