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Loud Parties: Are they a problem and is there an effective solution?

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ABSTRACT

Law enforcement agencies across the country are realizing that loud parties are a problem which needs to be dealt with and fortunately, there are proven ways to effectively address them. This paper seeks to determine the attitudes of law enforcement officials towards loud parties and identify those ways in which loud parties can be reduced. This is accomplished by conducting a survey of law enforcement officers and statistically analyzing a known noise abatement program. The survey found more than 40% of law enforcement agencies represented felt that loud parties were a problem and some actions were being taken to reduce the problem. The noise abatement program analyzed was successful and showed that some of the more traditional ways of addressing loud parties may not work as well as some non-traditional ways. Educating the public, making loud parties a higher priority, following up loud parties with property owners and managers proved to be successful ways to address loud party issues.

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INTRODUCTION

Loud parties have long been considered a nuisance for law enforcement, yet many agencies are now realizing the serious problem that they can be. They contribute a significant drain on manpower and can serve as a catalyst for many, more serious, offenses. Sexual assault, alcohol poisoning, aggravated assaults and even homicides are unfortunately, occurrences which take place at loud parties. A constant concern of loud parties is the degree to which they affect the quality of life for citizens of a given jurisdiction. With law enforcement becoming more customer focused, the quality of life issue has become more important. Community Policing seeks to resolve those negative issues faced by the public and loud parties are classified as one of the leading causes for the aforementioned reasons. To be abruptly woken at 3:00 a.m. when you have to be at work at 8:00 a.m. can sure have an impact on your quality of life. There is also a significant amount of collateral damage involved with loud parties. The trash, volume of traffic, and smell which accompanies loud parties can drive down property values and force citizens out of neighborhoods. An effective approach to addressing loud parties can be a benefit to most any law enforcement agency.

The purpose of this research paper is to identify to what degree loud parties affect law enforcement agencies and the constituents they serve. The author also seeks to discover what steps agencies have taken to address loud parties and prevent their negative consequences. Many agencies have taken a stronger enforcement approach, while some agencies have even created a task force to address loud parties. Other approaches include making loud party calls a higher priority, educating the public and following up on violations with property owners and managers. With the anticipated

response that loud parties are a problem, the author intends to answer the research question; what solutions are effective in addressing loud party problems?

A survey will be conducted that will answer the questions pertaining to the degree to which loud parties affect law enforcement agencies and their constituencies. The survey will also seek to discover what solutions have been identified. The survey is intended to determine how police departments view loud parties and if they still consider it a nuisance or a real problem. A statistical analysis will be conducted on an existing noise abatement program. This analysis will focus on what methods for addressing loud parties were found to be effective and the statistical significance in the changes those methods produced. Particular interest will be paid to the effectiveness of reduction methods compared to what methods officers felt would be effective.

It is anticipated loud parties are an issue affecting quality of life for almost all jurisdictions of law enforcement. Many agencies are anticipated to have made efforts to address loud parties and the ways in which they were addressed are expected to be fairly similar. Writing more citations, creating a special assignment, educating the public, and following through with property owners and managers are but a few of the expected responses to loud party problems.

This paper should provide a benefit to the entire field of law enforcement that finds loud parties to be an issue affecting them. It will provide a research and analysis base for recommending or not recommending different courses of action in addressing loud parties. The paper will also provide both a quantitative and qualitative look at aspects of loud parties that affect the quality of life for the constituents served by their agency.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A review of the literature related specifically to loud parties yields very little information. However, loud parties and the issues surrounding loud parties seem to be a natural evolution from community policing and problem solving philosophies. Community policing and problem solving issues have been a “hot-button” topic for the past few decades and there is much literature to draw upon in those areas. The author will discuss some of these issues in the community policing and problem solving fields and show how they are relative to loud parties.

Mark Harrison Moore contends that “Problem-solving and community policing are strategic concepts that seek to redefine the ends and means of policing”. (Moore 1992) Moore further points to the idea that problem solving seeks to get at the root of an incident instead of just that single incident. (Moore 1992) A traditional example the author could set forth is that of family violence. Police respond constantly to the same places for violence in the home. The mindset used to be it was between family members and not the business of the police. The mindset then turned towards arresting to protect victims. The community policing and problem-solving mindset would seek to find the underlying problems and pay attention to those. The problems in this example may be unemployment, mental disorders, or poor communication skills. To remedy those root causes may well remedy the need for police response.

The need for community-policing and problem solving stems from the lack of results of the traditional method of policing. It can also be argued that the traditional method has not gone far enough to make policing a profession and has created a divide between the police and the community that they serve. (Moore 1992)

“The foundations of a successful community policing strategy are the close, mutually beneficial ties between police and community members.”(Bureau of Justice 1994) Much of the literature on community policing follows the belief that police must work in concert with the members of a community to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. The literature further clarifies that the two core components of community policing are community partnership and problem solving. (Bureau of Justice 1994)

Community partnerships are formed through many different avenues to include businesses, community leaders, other public agencies, and most importantly the citizens that are affected in the community. These partnerships are vital in that they utilize the resources that the community offers in both ideas and materials. Combining those resources with traditional resources can yield a much better outcome. (Bureau of Justice 1994)

Problem solving is the intuitive approach to addressing community issues that has received more attention recently. Traditional policing emphasizes the more aggressive and reactive approach to policing. If an offense occurs, the police investigate arrest and prosecute. While this approach still has legitimacy, it is but one step in a multi-step solution to problems. The idea in problem solving is to systematically look at the issues and the environment in which those issues lie in order to creatively think of ways that those issues can be resolved and set about resolving those issues.

Problem solving and community policing are not limited to traditional criminal activity. In fact, often times the greatest success stories of community policing may well be the quality of life and fear of crime issues. (Glensor and Peak 1996) When speaking of community policing, Ellison also points to the importance of fear of crime and the

community quality of life. (Ellison 2006) Quality of life issues are one area that is overlooked with traditional policing. In a traditional policing mindset, a felony is more serious than a misdemeanor which is more serious than a nuisance. This thought process is without regard to the fact that often times a nuisance can offer a breeding ground for the misdemeanors which will often spawn the felony. In contrast to the traditional thinking, Community Policing and Problem Solving are sensitive to the idea that small problems that are ignored or allowed to flourish can often lead to bigger problems.

Review of the literature yields minor differences in definition and approaches to community policing and problem solving, but shows that the same general philosophy prevails. Some of the literature defines community policing programs while others define community policing philosophies. Both ideas aim to involve the community in policing and working with the community to create a better environment to live in. Problem solving has several approaches but they too have the same general pattern. Some use the "SARA" model which means to Scan, Analyze, Respond, and Assess, while others may use the "Systems" model. Each way of problem solving has the same core goal. The idea is to identify the problem, find a solution, implement that solution, and assess the results. The combination of community policing and problem solving is to identify problems and partner with the community to solve those problems.

The case in point for this paper is loud parties. While at face value a party may seem no more than a nuisance, the problems that spawn from that party can and often do include: underage drinking, assault, DWI, sexual assault, and alcohol poisoning to

name a few. For this reason, it is reasonable to say that loud parties are a prime issue to seek resolution in a Community Policing and Problem Solving model.

The police department in Durham, New Hampshire faced a very similar issue in 1999. The department experienced a serious incident of disorder when fans from a hockey game reacted to an overtime loss by taking over the town for a short period and causing damage. The police in this case analyzed the underlying problem and went about trying to solve that problem using the SARA method. (Kurz 2000) The department engaged in dialogue with the community to identify the underlying problems that set disorder in motion during the 1999 incident. They made a mutual determination of 21 issues that were of concern. The most prominent issue was the excessive consumption of alcohol. Since this town is in a University setting, there were some issues, and possible solutions, that were unique to that type of setting.

After careful analysis and input from the community, the response by the police was multi-pronged. They increased alcohol enforcement by arresting for possession or open container of alcohol. They worked with the court system to seek restitution for the costs they incurred for testing alcohol. They also set about a parental notification system to involve parents of students that were involved in the unwanted activities. They created an alcohol task force, stepped up safety inspections by code enforcement, and worked to improve landlord-tenant relationships. (Kurz 2000) This multi-pronged approach and SARA form of problem solving yielded results. The noise complaints decreased by 64%, and the percentage of arrests for the University of New Hampshire students decreased. . (Kurz 2000) Maybe of more importance to the police in this case,

were the relationships built with members of the community and the families of the University students.

The Durham, NH case was one of the only cases that could be found during this literature review and was the best case found. Most of the literature on loud parties comes from campus newspapers and are voicing unhappiness with enforcement of noise and party violations. This review intends to show that addressing loud parties is a direct outcome of community policing and problem solving. Citizens value their quality of life and turn to the police when that quality of life is threatened. It is from this interaction that police and communities can come together and work to solve noise, party, and alcohol issues.

METHODOLOGY

The question to be answered in this paper is whether or not loud parties are a problem for law enforcement and the constituents they serve. The author also seeks to find out to what degree loud parties are problems and what steps can be taken to successfully address those problems. Thirdly, the author intends to analyze a specific program conducted by the College Station Police to evaluate the effectiveness of different courses of action.

Loud parties have always been something that the police respond to and consider somewhat of a nuisance. It is the hypothesis of this author that loud parties are a real problem that not only result in more serious crimes, but decrease the quality of life for residents in communities where those parties take place. The prevalence of community policing and problem solving models throughout the country provide a stable platform to address loud party issues. Partnerships between police and community

members should help address loud party issues and lead to a better quality of life. It is expected that most departments will realize that loud parties can cause real problems and those departments have identified ways to address loud parties.

In analyzing the College Station Police Department's noise abatement program, the author expects to find methods of addressing loud parties that are successful. Stronger enforcement, proactive enforcement, higher priority, follow up, task force, and educating the public are all avenues that will be looked at and analyzed to determine if they are successful.

The inquiry into this subject will be accomplished by two methods. First was the completion of a survey. The survey included 25 departments including municipal agencies, Sheriff's offices, and school districts. The majority of respondents (80%) were from municipal agencies. The respondents come from agencies of varied sizes. There were 7 agencies with greater than 100 officers, 7 agencies with 51-100 officers, and 11 agencies with less than 50 officers. The response rate was 100 % on the 25 surveys sent out. The survey seeks to determine the attitude of departments towards loud parties as well as any specific steps taken by that department to address loud parties. The survey also seeks to find out what steps have been successful and what steps the survey participants feel would be successful.

The second method of inquiry was conducted using records from the College Station Police Department. The initial data collection concerns loud party calls between Sep 1, 1998 and August 31, 2002. The reason for that time period is the implementation of a noise abatement program that began at the end of August in 2000. The data collected represents the number of loud party calls taken by the College Station Police

as well as how those calls were answered. Key information in how those calls were answered includes whether or not a citation or warning was issued and how long those calls waited before they were answered.

The statistical data will be analyzed using a paired sample t-test to determine the significance with which changes may be measured in the loud party calls. The data will further be tested using a linear regression model to determine if the changes made are significant and if the steps taken to address the loud party problem can be shown to actually have an impact on that problem.

The last inquiry that will be made is to gather statistical information regarding loud parties in College Station since 2002. This information should present a finding of whether or not the noise abatement program has had long term effects on the number of loud parties answered. It is hoped that this information will also point to any factors that have proven to be long term solutions for loud parties and the problems that they cause.

FINDINGS

The first part of the findings in this case will focus on the surveys and attempt to answer the question of whether or not loud parties are a problem. When asked how they would describe their department's attitude towards loud parties, 40% of respondents felt that they were a nuisance, 24% felt they were somewhat of a problem, and 20% felt they were either a real or severe problem.

When asked if their department had taken specific steps to address loud parties, 72% of respondents stated that they had. Of those that had taken specific steps only 50% described them as successful. The respondents were then asked what those steps

were and a list emerged with stronger enforcement being at the top of the list with 83% of departments attempting that. The next highest method was proactive enforcement with 61%, follow-up 28%, higher priority 22%, Task force 6%, and educate the public 6%.

The next question asked of respondents was to rank what methods they felt would be most effective in addressing loud party calls and the results were much like those of the previous category. Stronger enforcement ranked first, followed by proactive enforcement, follow up, educate the public, higher priority and task force. It should be noted that the only difference in what agencies were doing compared to what they felt would be effective was educating the public. This method was used the least but ranked fourth on which methods respondents felt would be most effective. The last question respondents addressed was what they felt the primary problems from loud parties were. The number one response was a reduction in quality of life, followed by leads to serious crime, drain on manpower, and impact on property values.

To summarize the findings of the survey, it appears that loud parties are still considered a nuisance, but a substantial portion (44%) are now labeling them as a problem. The survey also reveals that agencies still tend to fall back on traditional policing when it comes to loud parties. This is evident by the fact that 83% list stronger enforcement as their method of addressing parties while only 6% educate the public. Again, it is interesting to note that only 6% of agencies address the public education while education ranked higher on methods preferred by respondents to deal with this issue.

The next part of the findings in this case deal with the College Station Noise Abatement program. In order to put those findings into context it is necessary to provide some background about the program. In the summer of 2000 the College Station Police were tasked to look into methods of addressing loud parties due to some complaints that had come to the attention of the city council. The police department formed a committee consisting of one Lieutenant and two Sergeants. These three people began making contacts with different people in the community to attempt to identify the problem and ways to deal with it. They met with Bryan Police, Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission, Texas A&M University Police, Property Managers and Owners, Homeowners Associations, City Prosecutors, District and County Attorneys, Municipal Court Judge, Greek Council and others to try and analyze the problem. The result of those meetings was to compile a list of identified problems. The list was then narrowed down to the top six most important problems:

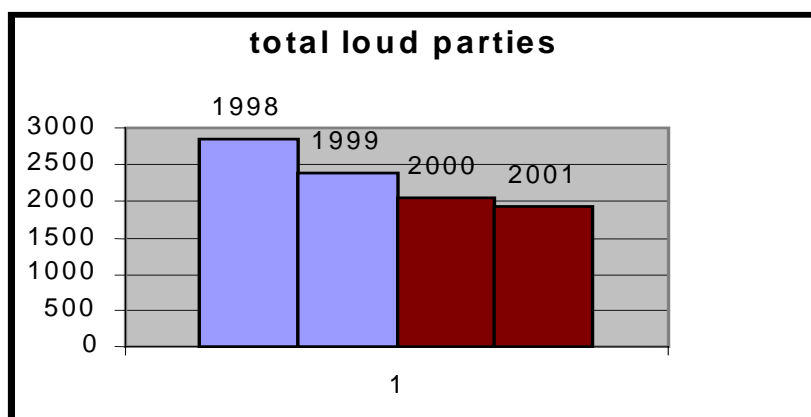
- Time that loud parties take away from other police activities. Large parties take a substantial investment in manpower to resolve.
- Repeat loud parties. Officers responding to the same location more than once.
- Size of parties. Parties left unchecked often grow to proportions that are out of control
- Alcohol violations that often occur with loud parties
- Lack of knowledge by property owners and managers about loud parties occurring on their property.
- Decrease in quality of life issues for College Station residents.

After much discussion and debate among the committee as well as other interested parties it was determined that there would be a four part plan instituted to address loud parties in College Station:

1. A noise abatement task force was formed. That task force would utilize three University Police Officers and three College Station Police Officers to work the six weekends of home football games each year. They would work Thursday through Saturday from 10:00 pm to 4:00 am and their primary mission would be to address loud party calls both reactively and proactively.
2. The priority of loud party calls was changed. Instead of being a low priority, they will get to it when everything else is done, they were responded to as soon as possible after they were called in. They were actually given the same priority as a “real crime” that was not in progress. The idea was to prevent parties from getting too large.
3. The third approach was education. They hired a civilian employee to follow up on each loud party citation with the owner or manager of the property to ensure they were aware of what was going on with their tenants and allow them to take appropriate action. This person also conducts an on-going educational campaign utilizing various media outlets, civic groups, and student groups. This position educates on alcohol violations as well as noise violations and what actions will be taken. They also do neighborhood walks each month of the fall semester in neighborhoods with high student populations to educate them on noise and alcohol laws. The idea is to encourage people to have fun but be responsible and considerate of others.
4. The last approach was a change in emphasis with the patrol division. They took a more proactive stance on enforcement and if a violation was observed, they were encouraged to cite instead of warn unless there was discretionary reasons not to. This was a paradigm change since the officers used to feel the need to always warn first at a loud party before citing.

This four step approach mirrors many of the issues brought up in the survey and will provide an opportunity to test some of the theories about what will and what will not help in reduction of loud party calls. The statistical analysis for this project was carried out in two parts. First, the two years prior to implementation of the project were compared to the two years after the implementation. Secondly, the general party information was analyzed for all of the years since implementation to determine any long-term trends and attempt to justify those trends.

The first portion analyzed was simply the number of loud party calls answered. The monthly totals averaged 218 per month before the program and 165 per month after the program. The totals were subjected to a paired sample t-test and the test returned a t-score of 5.490, which means the change is statistically significant at .000 significance. In simple terms that means that there is a near 100% chance that the change is statistically significant.



The second portion of the analysis focused on the citation to warning ratios or the stronger enforcement emphasis and time calls were held. The mean ratio before the program was 0.64 citations to warnings meaning that for every 0.64 citations issued there was one warning issued. The mean ratio after the program was 1.52 or 3 citations

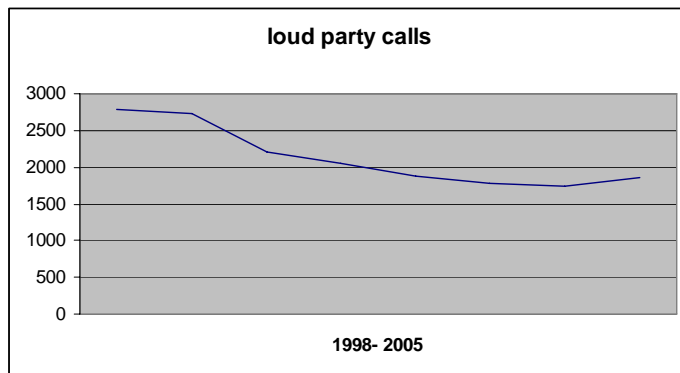
to every 2 warnings. This was also subjected to a paired sample t-test and the resulting t-score was -3.759, which has a .001 significance level. The time calls were held before the program averaged to be 19.5 minutes compared to 8 minutes after the program. The time calls held was also analyzed and resulted in a paired sample t-test score of 110 which is at the 0.000 significance level.

The next step was an effort to determine the cause and effect of citation to warning ratios and time calls were held. A regression analysis was conducted using both the ratio of citations to warnings and the time that calls were held as variables to explain the party reduction. The results showed that the two variables were significant and explain a significant portion of the change. The ratio did show a significant effect with a t-score of 2.343 which yields a significance level of 0.024 and the time that calls were held showed a t-score of 3.920 which leads to a 0.000 significance level. The lower significance level for time calls were held means that we can be even more confident in the effect time that calls were held had an impact than we can in the ratio. Although both have quite a significant impact.

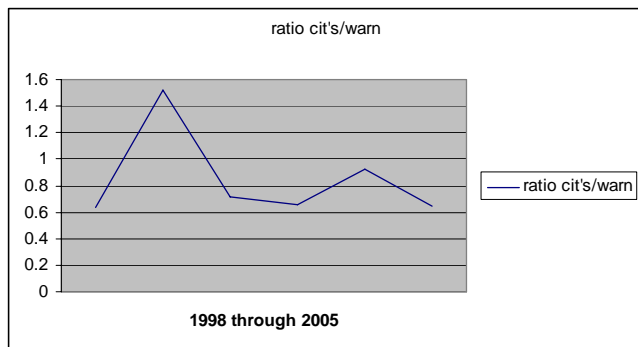
Statistical analysis was a useful tool in proving that the noise abatement program worked and that citation to warning ratios (stronger enforcement) and times that calls were held were both significant contributors to the success of the program. The next questions to be answered were whether or not the other actions taken were contributors to the success of the program. To answer the question for the task force was rather simple since that group only worked 6 weekends a year. Those weekends did show a reduction in loud party calls but so did the other 46 weeks of the year. Therefore, intuitive thinking would surmise that, while the task force was useful, it could not be

significantly responsible for the drop in the other 46 weeks of the year. This brings to light the question of education and follow-up. The initial analysis cannot answer whether or not these had a significant effect since that would have to be a long term analysis.

A more general follow-up analysis was conducted on loud party calls in the city of College Station to determine if there were any long- term impacts from the measures instituted in the noise abatement program. The number of loud party calls were measured for the years since the first analysis was conducted. The number of calls continued to go down through 2004 and turned slightly upward in 2005. This slightly upward trend would tend to represent a leveling off of the loud party calls. The overall drop in loud parties from 1998 through 2005 was 34%. This drop took place with a continued population growth over that period of approximately 3% per year.



The possible reasons for that sustained drop were examined to try and determine exactly what does work and what does not. The task force has continued but as previously mentioned that is not likely to sustain the long term drop with the limited usage of the task force. The ratio of citations to warnings was also examined to see if that reflected the drop in loud party calls. The ratio for the years after the program went back down to near what it was before the program started.



The amount of time that calls were held has stayed relatively constant since the program began. They are still considered a higher priority call and are answered quickly. The only two other strategies introduced in the noise abatement program were education and follow-up. Since these measures do not lend themselves easily to statistical analysis, their value may be teased out by eliminating the other noise abatement measures as causal factors in the reduction. As previously mentioned, the citations to warnings ratio has returned to pre-program levels, and the task force has limited impact on the overall loud party picture. This leaves the times that calls are held, education of the public and follow-up with the property owners and managers as the only measures still being taken during the long-term, sustained decline in loud parties.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

Community Policing and Problem Solving have become a way of life for law enforcement agencies across this nation and the world. One of the focal points of community policing is to work with the community to address issues that affect their life and not necessarily those issues that the law enforcement agency traditionally deals with. Loud parties can cause a major quality of life issue for any community when they happen to you. The interruption of sleep, degradation of neighborhoods and catalysis for more serious crimes are all valid concerns that need to be addressed. They also

represent a drain on manpower for police departments. The issues considered in this paper deal with attitudes police officers have towards loud parties as well as possible solutions to loud parties.

It was anticipated that many departments now recognize that loud parties are a real problem. The survey conducted for this project shows some evidence to that effect. More than 40% of those surveyed recognized loud parties as some sort of problem for their agency. The survey conducted for this paper leads the author to believe that loud parties are a problem. The methods for addressing loud parties tends to show that we often still think in the traditional way. The respondents to the survey reported the most common method of addressing loud parties to be stronger enforcement at 83%. More non-traditional ways such as follow-up, higher priority, and public education garnered much less support with 28%, 22%, and 6% respectively.

The second portion of this project was to determine how to address loud parties in a successful way. As with any community policing problem, the first step seems to be including the community in finding a solution. This puts more options on the table because everyone is not thinking in the same traditional style. With new options we can think out of the box and come up with better ways to resolve the problem. It is also important to have the support of the community behind a program so that they work as ambassadors to a degree in defending that program. The evaluation of the College Station noise abatement program shows that the community was involved extensively and they were a key contributor and supporter. This does not mean that the way College Station developed the program is the best way for everyone but it does provide some empirical evidence about what can work.

The statistical data analyzing the two years prior to implementation of the program to the two years after implementation, presents clear and convincing evidence that this program works. The paired sample t-tests provide proof that the change is significant. The two years after the program had 24% fewer loud party calls than the two years prior to the program. In an effort to determine what caused that drop, further analysis showed that the ratio of citations to warnings and the time that a call is held were both significant contributors to the drop. The one question not answered in the initial analysis was; what effect does education and follow-up have on loud parties.

The follow up analysis helped determine the long-term results of the noise abatement program and helped determine the effect of follow-up and education. The first key finding in the long-term analysis was that not only did parties stay at lower levels, they actually continued to decrease. In the 7 years analyzed, parties went down 34% while population kept going up in those years. In the three full years since the first analysis, the ratio of citations to warnings quickly returned to where it was before the program and stayed at that level. This leaves out stronger enforcement as the reason parties continued to decrease. This does not rule out stronger enforcement as a significant step to start a reduction in loud parties. The task force only works six weeks out of the year and has had very little production since the first two years of the program. That leaves out a task force as a primary reason for the continued decline. The only program items left are: increased priority of calls, follow-up, and education. It seems clear that these three approaches to loud parties are responsible for the long-term and sustained decrease in loud party calls.

These more non-traditional actions have resolved an issue that has been at least a nuisance and at worst a major issue for police departments everywhere and especially those working in a “party” atmosphere such as college towns. The conclusion reached by this author is that loud parties are a problem that community policing and problem solving are well equipped to deal with. There are ways to reduce loud parties and it may take a shift in paradigm to realize those ways. A successful way to deal with loud parties may well be to:

- Educate the public
- Reinforce that education with enforcement
- Follow-up with property owners and managers
- Raise the call priority and respond quicker

While this project makes a compelling case for reducing loud parties, it is not without limitations. To determine just how much of a problem loud parties are, it would be useful to survey those citizens affected by loud parties and determine their feelings on the matter. The parents of young children who are woken by loud parties at 3:00am may well have some strong feelings on the subject. It would also be helpful to compare statistics on crimes that have their start at loud parties. That data may be difficult to isolate but it would be possible to compare reductions or increases in loud parties to reductions or increases in crimes that often originate at loud parties. Another limitation is the inability to separate the effects of follow-up, education, and higher priority from each other. The only way this author can think of to do that is to conduct different programs leaving different variables out to determine the true effect of each. Intuitively it seems that all three have very strong effects and they work in a synergistic fashion in complementing each other.

This study is relevant to all of law enforcement since it affects the lives of their citizens and the ability of the police to do their entire job. Community policing and problem solving demand that we look at ways to improve delivery of police services. There is also a specific benefit for police agencies in the reduction of manpower needed to address loud parties and the reduction in crimes that start at loud parties.

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