

# What's a Crime Prevention Officer Worth?

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Some of this past summer's headlines about the budget crisis being faced by many local law enforcement agencies were alarming, to say the least. "Crime Unit To Be Disbanded," "Budget Cuts May Take Bite Out of Gilbert Crime Prevention Unit," and "McGruff the Crime Dog Also Walks the Plank If This Budget Amendment Passes," were just three of the most dire. However, the news isn't all bad; some jurisdictions rose to the budgetary challenge and found ways to fund their crime prevention programs. In Grand Rapids, Michigan, for example, commissioners added a crime prevention coordinator back into their \$112 million budget for the fiscal year starting July 1. In Pomona, California, the city council tapped the police overtime fund for \$111,000 to fund its two community service officers for crime prevention.

The economic crisis and the tighter state and local government budgets that have resulted have forced many sheriffs and police chiefs to look for ways to maximize their resources. During past times of tight budgets, some sheriffs and chiefs eliminated crime prevention positions or reassigned crime prevention staff and community policing officers to fill full-time street patrol positions. Does eliminating crime prevention positions or reassigning crime prevention staff to street patrol actually save money? Shifting an officer who provides crime prevention services to the street may not accomplish a great deal. Typically, the reassigned crime prevention officer helps to staff just one quarter of a 24-hour patrol beat or sector. However, a crime prevention officer is a department-wide problem-solver for the department and can help to reduce service calls, crime, and court costs and provide a more valuable service than just staffing a street patrol beat on one working shift.

Crime prevention has become a standard program at the majority of law enforcement agencies. The most recent Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) survey, *Data for Individual State and Local Agencies With 100 or More Officers*, reported that 518, or 65 percent of the surveyed agencies, had full-time crime prevention units. The BJS Statistics *Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics Survey* reported that 11,630 agencies, or 74 percent of local law enforcement agencies, provide crime prevention education services.

The goal of crime prevention is to stop crime from

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happening in the first place. When crime prevention is successful, police, criminal justice and community resources are saved while making the community safer. An excellent example of the value of crime prevention is a problem that has been draining law enforcement resources since the first energy crisis in the 1970s—gas drive-off theft. When gasoline prices are high, the number of gas drive-off thefts can increase dramatically, placing a significant strain on police resources.

A 2004 study by the Virginia Crime Prevention Association (VCPA) found that gas drive-off theft accounted for 5 percent of the state's overall crime rate. In one large Virginia city, gas drive-off theft accounted for 10 percent of the reported crime. In that city, one of the police department's crime prevention officers addressed the problem by convincing a major gasoline retailer to adopt a pay-before-you-pump policy, which other dealers soon copied.

Pay-before-you-pump is the simplest and most cost-effective way to stop gas drive-off theft from occurring in the first place, so that it does not become a police problem. The typical response to gas drive-off theft has often been enhanced enforcement. Many states have adopted a policy that allows suspension of a driver's license for a drive-off theft conviction. When used aggressively, these policies can actually increase police costs with increased investigations and court time. The VCPA gas drive-off study found that one law enforcement agency was actually using police stakeout teams to detect and capture people who were driving off without paying for gas. A crime prevention officer can develop a coordinated plan to encourage more gasoline retailers to adopt a pay-before-you-pump policy that will reduce gas drive-off thefts and law enforcement agency costs throughout an entire community.

It is interesting to note that the National Association of Convenience Stores attributed a 59 percent drop in losses from gas drive-off theft from 2005 to 2006 to broader use of pay-before-you-pump policies by gas retailers ( *The State of the Industry 2006*, by the National Association of Convenience Stores). Drive-offs cost the industry \$300 million in 2005,

or \$2,678 per each store selling gas. In 2007, the impact of pay-before-you-pump polices was even greater. The 2007 survey found that the cost of gas drive-off theft had dropped to \$134 million, or \$1,000 per store.

Crime prevention officers organize and manage community involvement programs such as Neighborhood Watch and Citizen's Police Academies. These programs help to reduce crime while providing valuable volunteer resources that assist law enforcement agencies to meet many of their public safety responsibilities. Neighborhood Watch provides the organized link to the community that law enforcement agencies need to communicate and work with the community to solve problems. Neighborhood Watch has become an important resource that emergency management staff has been relying on to involve community residents in emergency preparedness and homeland security.

How has the work of crime prevention officers across the country impacted the incidence of crime? When it was created in 1972, one of the main goals of Neighborhood Watch was to reduce burglary. Crime prevention officers have been promoting Neighborhood Watch and other crime prevention measures such as deadbolt locks, alarm systems, and better lighting to reduce burglary. These crime prevention measures, along with other measures taken by law enforcement agencies, have helped to bring about a significant reduction in burglaries. The peak year for burglary in United States was 1980, when there were 3,795,200 burglaries for a rate of 1,684 burglaries per 100,000 persons. Since then, the burglary rate has dropped 57 percent, with 2,176,140 burglaries reported in 2007, a rate of 723 per 100,000 persons or 1,619,060 fewer burglaries.

The growth of the use of burglar alarms, while helping to reduce crime, also has led to an increased workload for law enforcement agencies. Burglar alarms generate a significant number of police service calls and the vast majority of alarm calls, between 94 percent and 98 percent, are false. The false alarms typically result from poor maintenance or a lack of awareness about the operation of the alarm system. One study suggests that 20 percent of alarm systems trigger 80 percent of false alarms. A crime prevention officer can work with homeowners and businesses to reduce the incidence of false alarm calls. This is an example of how participants in a Neighborhood Watch program can be trained by crime prevention staff to more effectively use crime prevention tools and techniques which all help to reduce demand for police services.

Another source for high levels of police service calls are apartment communities. A crime prevention officer can work with apartment managers to revise leases and property management practices that have been shown to reduce crime and police service calls. In a three-year period, the Mesa, Arizona, Police Department reduced police service calls by 37 percent and police reports by 48 percent in 21 apartment communities. This was accomplished with a focused problem-solving initiative where the police and apartment managers worked together to make the communities

safer and less dependent upon the repeated dispatch of the police for service calls. The Chesterfield County, VA, Police Department took this a step further when it assigned a full-time civilian apartment community coordinator to work in the department's crime prevention unit.

Finally, one of the most important ways that crime prevention has reduced costs is through fewer injuries and deaths of law enforcement officers, because crime prevention plays a very important role in officer safety. The Newhall Incident in California in 1970 sparked a revolution in law enforcement training that produced the officer survival initiative. The Newhall incident involved four California Highway Patrol officers who were killed in a 4 ½ minute gun battle with two career criminals.

The investigation of the incident revealed that the officers had not been properly prepared to engage in a gun battle. There were issues associated with response to high-risk situations, weapons training, and equipment. The investigation of the incident led to a completely revamped set of procedures to be followed during high-risk and felony stops, with emphasis at every step on officer safety. This incident led to an overhaul of the training of law enforcement officers throughout the country. Procedures for the use of firearms have been changed, methods of arrest have been perfected, and communications have been improved.

Before this change in training philosophy, officers quite often learned about safety on the job—through trial and error, a dangerous process. Today, officer survival is a major component of all introductory law enforcement training and is reinforced with mandatory in-service training. But when looked at very simply, police officer survival training is nothing more than good crime prevention. Police officers are taught how to reduce the opportunity for crime by learning officer survival techniques that they can use to keep themselves from becoming crime victims. A good crime prevention officer provides the same service for the broader community in a very cost-efficient fashion. When considering the costs of crime and tighter budgets, the obvious response is that it pays to prevent crime in the first place, rather than responding to it after it has occurred. A crime prevention officer is too valuable to reassign to a street patrol position. 🌟

## References

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