



Criminal Justice Commission

***BEENLEIGH CALLS FOR SERVICE
PROJECT: EVALUATION REPORT***

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Introduction

Most police officers know of places in the community that seem to require more police attention than others. These officers know that each time they attend to one of these places it is unlikely to be the last time. The term ‘repeat calls for service’ is used to describe this phenomenon, which can be defined as a noticeable pattern in a group of calls for service that are not random or universally distributed. This highly skewed concentration of calls for service, in relatively few locations, raises important questions about how police should deal with these types of calls.

In the late 1970s, an American university professor, Herman Goldstein, began espousing a different way of thinking about policing that was designed to shift the emphasis away from police merely reacting to incidents as they occurred to examining the main problems that lay at the heart of a particular incident or group of incidents. He urged police to collaborate with the community and use a problem-solving approach that did more than simply respond to incidents but actually attacked the underlying causes that were creating them.

In its simplest form, a problem-solving approach to policing involves a series of actions that can be summarised in the following steps:

- initial recognition of the existence of a policing problem
- in-depth exploration of possible causes
- development of a tailor-made response designed to reduce or eliminate the problem
- assessment of the effectiveness of the response.

In September 1996, the Criminal Justice Commission (CJC) and the Queensland Police Service (QPS) established the Beenleigh Calls for Service Project (BCFS Project), a six-month experiment to find out whether the application of problem-solving techniques would reduce the number of repeat calls for service in the Beenleigh Police Division.

The CJC’s involvement arose out of its statutory responsibility under section 23(g) of the *Criminal Justice Act 1989*.

The responsibilities of the Commission include –

(g) monitoring the performance of the Police Service with a view to ensuring that the most appropriate policing methods are being used, consistently with trends in the nature and incidence of crime, and to ensuring the ability of the Police Service to respond to those trends.

Research Division staff were mainly responsible for designing the project, analysing Beenleigh’s calls-for-service data, and conducting a full evaluation of the project upon its completion. The QPS was mainly responsible for staffing the project and providing advanced computer support.

The BCFS project was largely based on two early experiments with problem-solving that were conducted in the United States in the 1980s: Newport News’s integration of problem-solving into the day-to-day operations of an entire police department, and the Minneapolis Police Department’s Repeat Calls Address Policing (RECAP) project. The Beenleigh project also drew on several innovations in problem-solving that were trialled during the Toowoomba Beat Policing Pilot Project.

Description of the BCFS Project

The location for the project was Beenleigh, an outer suburban, predominately lower income area, lying midway between Brisbane and the Gold Coast.

Detailed planning for the project began in early 1996 with the following objectives:

- to reduce the number of repeat calls for service at targeted locations in Beenleigh

- to reduce the financial costs of providing a first response to targeted locations in Beenleigh
- to increase the ability of the QPS's Information Management System (IMS) to produce a basic workload analysis for use by local police units
- to increase police support for problem-solving.

The project was managed by a steering committee comprising representatives of the CJC's Research Division and the QPS South-Eastern Region. Day-to-day operations were the responsibility of an experienced police officer from Beenleigh Division who was seconded for six months to work on the project.

The project began with the Research Division analysing Beenleigh's calls-for-service records to identify various addresses in the area that were generating the highest number of calls over a particular period. Once an address was identified, a workbook was compiled containing details of each call for service. The workbook was given to the project officer (i.e. the seconded police officer) who used it to follow through the four stages of the SARA problem-solving model — Scanning, Analysis, Response, Assessment — in an effort to reduce the number of repeat calls. In total, 20 addresses were selected, grouped into two target groups of 10 addresses each.

The workbooks and the SARA problem-solving model helped the project officer identify the most significant policing problems at the targeted locations and guided him in implementing problem-solving strategies to reduce the number of repeat calls for service attributable to these locations.

Reducing the number of repeat calls

Case studies and an analysis of trends in the number of calls for service were used as the key measures for assessing the effectiveness of the project in reducing the number of repeat calls for service at the targeted locations.

The main findings were:

- The types of problem-solving activities over the course of the project generally centred on four themes:
 - focusing police attention on locations or individuals responsible for most policing problems (e.g. trialling the concept of 'priority patrol objectives', designed to increase police surveillance at repeat-call locations)
 - providing information or advice (e.g. providing advice to individuals and agencies on how to deflect offenders, elicit compliance with existing procedures, and improve staff training)
 - altering the physical environment of target locations (e.g. making recommendations for the clearing of bush and shrubs to improve visibility)
 - referring the problem to another agency for resolution (e.g. notifying a security agency of problems with an alarm going off accidentally, as a result of which the alarm was repositioned and staff retrained)
- During the project there was a noticeable decrease in the number of calls from targeted locations.
- The number of calls from some of the targeted locations increased after the project ended, perhaps due to the discontinuance of several strategies put in place during the project.
- Although the project reduced the number of repeat calls at the targeted locations, it is not possible to show the impact on the general workload at Beenleigh Division because of the small scale of the project and the methodological difficulties in interpreting trends in aggregate calls-for-service data.

Reducing the cost of repeat calls

The second major objective of the BCFS Project was to see if problem-solving could be used to reduce the financial cost associated with repeat calls for service at the targeted locations, both by reducing the total number of calls and by encouraging more efficient responses.

The main findings were:

- The cost of attending repeat-call locations in Beenleigh in 1996 was around \$250,000.
- There was some evidence of a downward trend in the cost of responding to calls at the targeted locations over the period of the project, offset to some extent by the cost of the project officer's involvement in the trial.
- The cost of responding to calls at the targeted locations during March–May 1997 (after the project had ended) was found to be 34 per cent less than the cost of attending calls at these locations over the same three-month period in 1996.

The evaluation also found that several of the initiatives trialled during the BCFS Project could be implemented in other districts and regions. For example, a new strategy for dealing with petrol drive-offs could be expected to generate long-term savings in Beenleigh and elsewhere. This suggests that using problem-solving to reduce repeat calls for service has the potential to be a reasonably cost-effective policing strategy, especially over the longer term.

Improving the QPS's Information Management System

Another objective of the project was to improve the IMS so that it could be used by operational police as a problem-solving tool. The three strategies used to achieve the objective were:

- to identify changes to the IMS that would facilitate the production of a basic workload analysis
- to trial modifications to the IMS aimed at reducing the high rate of errors in the data field used for recording addresses
- to advise staff on how to enhance the quality and use of IMS data.

The evaluation found that:

- There was a substantial improvement in the general quality and accuracy of IMS data during the project, which, for the most part, can be attributed to a series of modifications to the IMS carried out by the QPS's Information Systems Branch.
- Accuracy remained low for those types of addresses that were not readily identifiable by street name or number, such as public parks and schools.
- Police officers interviewed for the evaluation were generally happy with the changes made to the IMS and enthusiastically supported efforts to further develop the IMS as a managerial and problem-solving tool.

Increasing police support for problem-solving

The project aimed to promote police support for problem-solving by keeping police officers informed about the project and assisting them with the design of problem-solving course materials. As well, a workshop program was developed to promote the application of problem-solving methods by operational police.

The evaluation found that, despite these efforts, most police officers stationed at Beenleigh had little awareness of the project, the likely reasons being:

- There was no time to implement the strategy of briefing police on the project beforehand.
- Continual staff changes meant that some police surveyed for the evaluation had not had an opportunity to hear of the project.
- Beenleigh Division is extremely busy and so some police may not have had time to read about the project or discuss it with the project officer.

Although difficulties were encountered in raising awareness of the project, the workshops did improve knowledge of problem-solving among those senior police who attended.

Conclusions

The BCFS Project was found to be reasonably successful in demonstrating the effectiveness of the problem-oriented approach to repeat calls for service. Few difficulties were encountered in implementing the project and the level of cooperation between the CJC and the QPS remained high throughout.

The key findings of the evaluation also have implications for the wider application of problem-solving as a policing strategy. Briefly, the main lessons from the BCFS Project were:

- It is essential that officers have access to accurate and timely local information to analyse incidents and identify any potential policing problems.
- Greater emphasis should be placed on forming partnerships with individuals, groups and agencies to encourage more community involvement in problem-solving.
- Problem-solving needs to be strongly supported at the local, district and regional levels.
- Management needs to take a flexible approach to work practices and encourage officers to innovate and think creatively about the options available in resolving a problem.
- Police need to be patient with the problem-solving process, as some strategies need to be in place over longer periods to yield appreciable benefits.
- Strategies need to be developed to communicate properly the goals and benefits of problem-solving to the police and to the public.