

Finding Out What You Don't Know: Tips on Using Crime Analysts

By Kevin Paletta, Chief of Police, Lakewood, Colorado; and Stacy Belledin, Crime Analyst II, Lakewood, Colorado, Police Department

Years ago, one of the authors (K.P.) was the project manager in charge of replacing his department's computer system, and the department was trying to decide if it needed to spend thousands of dollars on a consultant or put the money toward equipment. Another member of the committee on which he served told him that the reason to hire a consultant is that "you don't know what you don't know." The same reason could be given for employing crime analysts.

Recently appointed chiefs frequently find themselves worrying about what they do not know. What crimes have the greatest impact on the community? What quality-of-life concerns do the residents have? What are their priorities for police services? For example, do they care more about student resource officers (SROs) in the schools or a directed enforcement unit? Fortunately, chiefs can often turn to their crime analysis units for the answers to these questions. Crime analysts serve as "consultants" to law enforcement agencies; with their help, agencies can access vital data and information about criminal activity in their communities.

For many agencies, it was not until recently that crime analysis became an integral component of their policing strategies. For years the Lakewood, Colorado, Police Department (LPD) was regarded as an innovative and cutting-edge law enforcement agency. Since 1970, the LPD has required its 250 officers to possess a four-year college degree; it has produced over 60 police chiefs from its ranks, a staggering number for a medium-sized agency; and it was highly touted in law enforcement publications as a professional and service-oriented agency. While these accounts of the agency were true, there was one area where the LPD was woefully lacking. The agency did not have a strong crime analysis function that put meaningful information into the hands of its police agents.

It became apparent that if the LPD was going to provide the level of public safety service to its citizens that reflected its reputation, it would need access to timely, accurate, and relevant data and analysis. For that to happen, the chief's role was going to be vital.

Developing Crime Analysis

The first step to developing the crime analysis unit was for the chief to support this function with personnel and resources. It became apparent that crime analysis personnel needed to possess the same cutting-edge technologies and qualities that the agency required for and from its police officers. Currently, the LPD crime analysis unit employs two highly educated and experienced analysts recruited from agencies that had excellent crime analysis programs, and they provide tactical, strategic, administrative, intelligence, and problem analysis to the department.

The next step was to establish a clear mission and priorities for the unit. The crime analysis unit at Lakewood is housed in the Investigations Division, but that does not mean it only supports detectives and analyzes tactical patterns. The analysts' primary role is to provide information to the patrol officers on the street and assist with their mission of problem solving, community policing, and directive patrol. The chief's role is to keep the crime analysts focused on supporting the agency's primary mission and not overwhelmed with administrative duties. If patrol officers at Lakewood were asked what the most significant crime problem in their sectors was, they would not have to rely only on their experience or intuition; they would have clear data and analysis to assist with their response.

Once a mission and priorities were established, there was a need to emphasize the crime analysis function as part of the department's daily operations. Patrol commanders should be able to answer two questions: what are the biggest crime problems in the community, and what is the department doing about them? This is the foundation of the CompStat philosophy, which strives to enhance accountability and problem solving within the department. Crime analysis can help to answer these

questions in various ways. First, crime analysts can inform other staff members of the pressing issues and emerging problems in their areas of responsibility. Lakewood crime analysts provide a tracking report that uses statistical analysis to determine which crimes in each sector are increasing or decreasing. This report examines data on both short-term (7-day and 30-day) and long-term levels. Staff members use the report as a primer for questions. For example, if there is an increase in robberies in the North Sector, those data are then analyzed to determine the root of the problem. Once data are analyzed, analysts can provide sound recommendations that can help solve such problems. Analysts are trained to be well informed and educated in the techniques of problem solving and situational crime prevention. They have ideas, both traditional and innovative, to help alleviate crime and disorder. The appropriate response is discussed, and analysts craft specific techniques to solve the problems identified in the data analysis. The strategies are then shared with patrol officers and investigators to achieve the desired result and to prevent future problems from occurring. From the top levels of an agency to the beat officers, using crime analysis can only improve problem-solving techniques and accountability.

The LPD sought opportunities to integrate the crime analysis function throughout the department. Recruits are now required to formulate a scanning, analysis, response, and assessment (SARA) model plan to respond to a crime problem in their sectors. They are strongly encouraged to use the crime analysts for such tasks as data gathering, analysis, response formulation, and assessment. They must successfully present their plans to their sector commanders before their training is complete. This instills in them an appreciation for the benefits of the function. It also gives the recruits an opportunity to see what crime analysis can do for them as police officers on the street. Additionally, there are projects and focus areas that the patrol division undertakes with the help of crime analysis. The West Third Place focus area is a neighborhood problem-oriented project that has been slowly progressing over the last two years. Using the SARA model, police wanted to respond to the community's concerns facing the neighborhood and in turn reduce crime and disorder in the area. However, it is in the nature of police to respond quickly to such problems; as a result, the A's in the SARA model—analysis and assessment—are usually neglected. Crime analysts emphasized the need to analyze data in the area, even though it takes more time and effort. By disseminating a neighborhood survey, patrol officers obtained data revealing a variety of issues that would have not necessarily been addressed if the analysis were not completed. The patrol officers and the crime analysts discussed the findings of the analysis and are currently in the first stages of developing sound strategies to respond to the issues outlined by the community. The collaboration between crime analysts and patrol officers allows the LPD to make smarter decisions and provide well-developed strategies to fight crime and disorder.

Role of Analysts

Tactically, the fundamental function of a crime analysis unit is to provide its "customers"—police officers and their support staff—with crime series, patterns, and trends and to help develop information that can improve the chances of apprehending criminals and preventing crimes. Crime analysts work with all types of reports and data at a level that cannot be replicated by command staff, line supervisors, detectives, or beat officers. Beat officers go from call to call and are primarily focused on their assigned beat. Investigators handle only their assigned cases. Command staff and line supervisors are usually busy with administrative roles and supervising the daily tasks of their subordinates. Crime analysis serves as the clearinghouse for all the data generated or obtained by the department and is usually the only unit in the department that is dedicated to recognizing trends in a timely manner, no matter where they are and what crimes they may involve.

Strategically and operationally, good crime analysts should be their chiefs' most valued consultants. They can provide their organizations with the timely, relevant, and accurate information they need to fulfill their mission. Analysts help prepare briefings and departmental reports and use analytical techniques to assist command staff in allocating resources for their agencies. Simply stated, police organizations are to provide a public safety service that meets the needs of their communities, and the strategic analysis performed by crime analysts can help influence departmental objectives and decision making.

As an example, LPD leadership recently asked the crime analysis unit to provide the department with an analysis of employee disciplinary conduct and to recommend tactics that could aid in preventing and reducing complaints within the department. In most cases, employee disciplinary data are stored and secured by internal affairs personnel. Even though analysis of these data could help an agency

truly delve into the problems that it may be facing when it comes to misconduct, such analyses are uncommon. Allowing trained expert analysts to analyze these data completely for the LPD enabled the department to find out how little it knew about the patterns of misconduct. This analysis allowed the command staff to take action, develop a strategy, and implement policies that produce better results and prevent further misconduct.

Just because crime analysts have the word “crime” in their titles does not necessarily mean that they deal only with crime issues. For a community to feel safe, police may have to take on issues that are not necessarily criminal in nature, such as homelessness and traffic concerns. Traffic analysis can reveal what the top accident locations are in a given jurisdiction, as well as the time of day and days of the week they are occurring and the most significant infractions. This information can help any traffic team strategize methods to alleviate traffic issues.

By contrast, crime data might not always tell the whole story about what is happening in a community. Agencies must be sure to listen to their communities. Statistics might reveal that car burglaries are the most prevalent crime problem in terms of dollar impact, numbers, and victims, but a survey could show that the community is more concerned about graffiti and its impact on their sense of safety. By listening to citizens through surveys, community partnerships, and street contacts, agencies can respond to both crime and quality-of-life issues. This form of interaction shows communities that agencies care about crime prevention and residents’ sense of security in the neighborhoods.

Role of Chiefs

Chiefs play a vital role in developing an effective relationship between crime analysts and the rest of the organization, including taking the following actions:

- **Emphasize the benefits of using the analysis function in support of the agency’s mission:** Crime analysts act as a catalyst for change and vision. The information they can analyze and disseminate among the various departments can help develop policy and provide support for staffing solutions, grant proposals, and information-sharing networks. Chiefs should be reasonable in their expectations and should not expect analysts to be able to identify the exact time and location of the next burglary. Crime analysis is a team effort; an agency cannot sit back and expect its analysts to spoon-feed it with data. It is important that active communication take place between the unit and the entire organization. Officers or detectives who notice a possible pattern need to communicate it immediately so analysis can begin.
- **Avoid tying the unit up on too many assignments unrelated to the mission:** As the crime analysis unit achieves a greater level of integration with daily operations, it usually experiences an increase in workload and requests. It is a natural progression—as analysts prove that their information is valuable, all levels of the organization want more of it. Chiefs need to establish that the top priority for their analysts is to provide timely, relevant, and accurate analysis to the department. Additionally, tying analysts up with too many administrative demands can negatively affect their ability to support their unit’s primary roles, providing customer service and tactical analysis to the department. Chiefs should help analysts reach a balance of providing tactical, strategic, and operational analysis without burdening them with irrelevant requests for information.
- **Expose analysts to the daily operations of the department:** There are many types of department meetings to which crime analysts should be invited, as they can provide insight into what the department does not yet know. For example, the LPD aided in staffing for the 2008 Democratic National Convention (DNC), which was held in downtown Denver in August. In preparation for the event, staff members had begun meeting to discuss how many officers the department could send downtown for the two-week period. Staffers were doing most of the work on their own when the crime analysis unit stepped in and volunteered to analyze data on patrol call loads and investigative case loads that the LPD had experienced in the same two-week period for the last three years. This information helped command staff determine the minimal levels needed to maintain public safety in Lakewood and how many officers could be provided for security for the DNC.
- **Integrate the unit into the agency’s training programs:** Even as crime analysis evolves, there can still be a lot of information that remains unknown to patrol officers and staff. To many, it is still somewhat of a mystery what crime analysis can do for their agencies. Crime

analysts can provide training and education through in-service training and roll-call briefings. In addition, providing this training at the recruit academy solidifies the importance of the crime analysis function within the minds of new officers.

- **Provide administrative and financial support to the crime analysis unit to enhance its effectiveness:** Crime analysis is a relatively new profession and continues to evolve at a very fast pace. It is crucial that analysts are provided with opportunities to learn new techniques and to develop their career paths in the same manner that training and tools are provided for police officers. Crime analysts need continual training and career development, additional data that can aid in analysis, up-to-date software and hardware, and continued support from the executive level of the agency. In the long run, the return on investment is well worth the expense.
- **Continually seek new opportunities for the organization to utilize analysis staff:** Crime analysts should be focused on helping their agencies improve the quality of life of their citizens by placing valuable and timely data in the hands of officers and detectives. However, they should not focus exclusively on crime-related matters. Crime analysts can be instrumental in identifying problem areas associated with traffic and quality-of-life concerns. They can also assist with developing strategies for responding to these problems and for assessing the effectiveness of organizational interventions.

Conclusion

The future of the law enforcement profession holds vast opportunities for data sharing and analysis across agency boundaries. In the era following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, citizens have a reasonable expectation that this interaction is already occurring, that agencies already share everything relevant to their jurisdictions. This includes projects that involve direct access to databases shared among local, state, and federal agencies. The sharing of information between federal intelligence and military sources with state and local jurisdictions would further enhance this process. With these partnerships and levels of cooperation, the opportunities for analysis and enhancements to public safety are endless. The LPD and the state of Colorado are now taking steps toward the realization of that goal. ■

[Top](#)

From The Police Chief, vol. LXXV, no. 9, September 2008. Copyright held by the International Association of Chiefs of Police, 515 North Washington Street, Alexandria, VA 22314 USA.