

# Safer Neighborhoods through Precision Policing Initiative: Lowell Police Department



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# INTRODUCTION

The Lowell Police Department (LPD) is 1 of 15 departments selected to participate in the Safer Neighborhoods through Precision Policing Initiative (SNPPI). SNPPI provides policy review, assessments, training, and technical assistance to a cohort of law enforcement agencies across the nation. The four goals of the initiative are to identify promising strategies that reduce crime, protect officers' safety and wellness, produce productive interagency partnerships with law enforcement and community stakeholders, and implement innovative and effective technologies to assist police department to safeguard neighborhoods. ▀

# METHODOLOGY

Each of the 15 selected departments is assigned a CNA Strategic Site Coordinator (SSC) and an operations analyst to assist with planning, implementation, coordination, and delivery of technical assistance. CNA worked with the LPD to develop a customized strategy to capitalize on the great work already in progress across the four goals of precision policing. To do this, CNA looked at the LPD's policies and practices related to crime reduction efforts, policy effectiveness, technological capabilities, training structures and offerings, and officer safety and wellness philosophies. The CNA team then helped identify the TTA opportunities and additional tools and resources to enhance areas related to the principles of precision policing. CNA documented these best practices and will share them with police agencies nationwide to advance the goals of precision policing. ▀

# BACKGROUND

Beginning in the 1990s, the LPD adopted a problem-and partnership-oriented approach to policing that has transformed the nature of crime fighting in the city. It is the mission of the LPD to work with the community and agency partners to reduce crime, alleviate the fear of crime, and improve the quality of life in the city of Lowell. The department stresses policing through partnership, professionalism, integrity, and fairness. This approach is referred to as "The Lowell Way of Policing."

## Community Partnerships Stabilize Neighborhoods

The LPD has been remarkably successful in reducing crime, stabilizing neighborhoods, and building strong partnerships with the community. The department's success is directly related to its strategic approach to policing that emphasizes problem solving, enforcement, and improved public safety. The current superintendent, William Taylor, has continued to work closely with interagency and community partners to implement a productive approach that has reduced the city's overall and violent crime rates. Since 2013, property crime<sup>1</sup> has been reduced by 47 percent and violent crime<sup>2</sup> by 48 percent. Notably, there has been only one homicide in the city during the past three years.

1 The LPD reports crimes based on the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS); property crimes include Arson, Burglary/Breaking & Entering, Theft from a Building, Theft from a Motor Vehicle, Theft of MV Parts/Accessories, Stolen Property, and Vandalism.  
2 Violent Crimes include Murder, Forcible Rape, Robbery, and Aggravated Assault.

## Lowell Police Department Profile

**Leadership:** Superintendent William Taylor  
*(since 2013)*

**Population:** Approx. 110,558 residents

**Area:** 14.52 sq. miles

**Sworn Officers:** 239 *(as of 2016)*

**Total Crime (2016):** 2,579 offenses

- **Violent Crime:** 380 offenses

- **Property Crime:** 2,199 offenses

**Website:** <https://www.lowellma.gov/221/Police-Department>

## Impacts of the Opioid Crisis

Despite this progress, the Lowell community experiences significant challenges with both the opioid crisis and incidences of youth gang crime. While the opioid crisis has had a negative impact throughout Massachusetts and the United States, its effects have been particularly devastating in Lowell. In 2016, there were 69 opioid-related deaths<sup>3</sup> and 687 nonfatal opioid related overdoses in the city.<sup>4</sup> Opioid abuse has had a negative impact on the entire community, not just individuals with substance use disorder and their families. Evidence suggests that many recent property and violent crimes in Lowell are associated with the epidemic.

## Addressing Gang-Involved Youth

In addition to the challenges associated with the public health crisis of opioid addiction, Lowell continues to experience persistent challenges with ethnic youth gangs, which emerged with the rapid increase in Latino and Southeast Asian immigration over the past three decades. Youth gangs aggressively target and recruit immigrant juveniles with limited English language skills using the false pretense of increased acceptance and security. A 2006 research study found 19 active youth gangs in Lowell that were responsible for nearly 50 percent of violent gun-related crime.<sup>5</sup> While the violence associated with these gangs has decreased in recent years, they remain a powerful influence in Lowell's diverse communities. ▀

3 Opioid overdose statistics are continuously updated on the Massachusetts Department of Public Health Website (<https://www.mass.gov/lists/current-opioid-statistics>). The number of opioid overdose fatalities is subject to change after pending death certificates are updated.

4 Lowell Police Department: Smart Policing Action Plan: March 2017.

5 Braga, A. A., McDevitt, J., & Pierce, G. L. (2006). "Understanding and Preventing Gang Violence: Problem Analysis and Response Development in Lowell, Massachusetts." *Police Quarterly*, 9(1), 20-46.

## IDENTIFY PROMISING STRATEGIES TO REDUCE CRIME

LPD uses enforcement, intervention, and prevention campaigns to reduce the presence and impact of ethnic youth gangs in the city. LPD's Gang Unit is composed of officers who are bilingual—fluent in Spanish and multiple Southeast Asian languages—to specifically address the diverse nature of the gang members who cause the most harm to the community. In addition to the enforcement of gang-related offenses and identification of gang members, the gang unit engages targeted youth in an intervention and prevention campaign. The gang unit regularly attends community events to strengthen trust. Officers organize a community basketball league and recruit youth players who are at risk of joining gangs. Gang unit officers also give presentations at local schools and summer camps in the city.

The Lowell Police Department also promotes gang intervention and prevention through robust school resource officer (SRO) programs. Three SROs are assigned to Lowell High School, and five additional SROs work in the city's middle schools. These SROs conduct home visits to students who have been arrested, have low attendance, or may have a high-risk relationship with a gang. During the summer months, the SROs organize a popular youth leadership program called the Student Police Academy. The curriculum focuses on gang prevention, leadership, and life skills in a police academy context and targets children in grades 5 through 8. Over 3,200 youth have graduated from the Lowell Student Police Academy.<sup>6</sup> ■

## ESTABLISHING PRODUCTIVE PARTNERSHIPS

“The Lowell Way”—the partnership-oriented approach to policing in Lowell—is not defined by a single program or initiative. Instead, it is a strategic philosophy integrated into the agency's culture. Through this strategic approach, the LPD has strengthened trust between the department and the diverse communities that it serves. Department leadership considers the decreasing crime rates in Lowell to be a direct result of increased trust between the public and the police.

The Lowell Way is integrated into policing efforts at every level of agency. As part of their orientation, new officers design and conduct service projects to become more familiar with the community and strengthen partnerships between the LPD and community members. In addition, proactive strategies to prevent crime and increase trust between the community and the police are incorporated into all in-service and academy training curricula. Problem-solving teams, led by patrol supervisors, focus on working with stakeholders to reduce crime and jointly address community problems.

Members of the LPD recognize that public safety and crime reduction are not solely police responsibilities, but are strengthened through active partnerships with law enforcement and community stakeholders. The LPD has prioritized developing partnerships in its efforts to make the community safer and to develop solutions for the complex causes of crime. Recent initiatives that are rooted in strong relationships with other public agencies and the community include those described in the following sections.

## Community Opioid Outreach Program (CO-OP Program)

The LPD and its community-stakeholder partners have developed a two-pronged strategy to confront the opioid crisis:

- I. Intervention targeting overdose victims
- II. Early intervention program targeting children exposed to opioid overdoses.

The LPD developed this comprehensive strategy with the support and cooperation of the Middlesex District Attorney's Office, the Lowell Fire Department, the Lowell Health Department, the Mental Health Association of Greater Lowell (MHA), Trinity EMS, and the Lowell House, an addiction treatment service organization. Members from each of these stakeholders create the CO-OP Team. The CO-OP Team contacts an overdose victim within 48 hours of referral and connects them to immediate treatment facilities. Referrals also come from patrol officers, who now respond to all reported overdose calls, community members and other CO-OP team members. In accordance with the early intervention program, the CO-OP team identifies the children, grandchildren, and minor siblings of the overdose victims and connects them with the appropriate intensive intervention and counseling programs.

In addition to supporting the CO-OP Team, LPD has invested resources in preventing opioid overdoses. Patrol officers are now equipped with naloxone and automated external defibrillators, designed to assist overdose victims. LPD was one of the earliest departments to issue these life-saving techniques.

These support services for victims and their families are critical because research indicates that drug users are more likely to seek treatment shortly after experiencing an overdose. In addition, exposure to an overdose at an early age can have long-lasting and devastating effects on children. The Community Opioid Outreach Program is a comprehensive, citywide, multidisciplinary strategy to reduce drug use and overdose deaths in Lowell.

## Investing in Community Engagement

Officers within every unit of the LPD are committed to strengthening trust and partnerships. The diversity of immigrant and refugee communities within the city has created unique challenges for the Lowell Police Department. These challenges include mistrust of police based on previous interactions in the countries they emigrated from, knowledge of laws and rights of victims, and language barriers. To overcome these challenges, the department appointed a Director of Community Relations. Director Sara Khun acts as the primary link between the immigrant community and the police department. She is a refugee from Cambodia who immigrated to Lowell as a child. Her experience as an immigrant increases her legitimacy with diverse populations in Lowell and helps strengthen trust between the police department and the community. Ms. Khun holds regular orientation tours for recent immigrants at the Lowell Police Department headquarters. These tours help create a connection between the police and new residents and are crucial to inform people of the various units within the LPD, how to report a crime, and, more specifically, of domestic violence laws and the rights of victims.

“ The Lowell Way is integrated into policing efforts at every level of agency.”

6 [www.lowellma.gov/233/Student-Police-Academy](http://www.lowellma.gov/233/Student-Police-Academy).

## Safe Summer Community Movie Nights

The LPD also actively develops opportunities to increase communication between the department and the wider community. During the summer months, the department hosts Safe Summer Community Movie Nights, during which it screens popular movies outside in selected hot-spot neighborhoods. Several hundred people have participated in these events. Before the movie, staff members from the department facilitate a gang prevention discussion for the children and youth in attendance.

## Community Relations Council

The Lowell Police Department also collaborates with the community through its Community Relations Council, which serves as an advisory board for major changes in departmental policies and procedures. The Community Relations Council is a public forum and meetings are open to anyone who wishes to attend. Each meeting focuses on a specific topic, such as immigration laws, community/police relations, and child abuse laws. Council members use these meetings to disseminate accurate and useful information to the community and reports back to the department on community member's concerns. ▀

## LESSONS LEARNED FROM SNPPI

Through SNPPI, LPD partnered with subject matter experts from CNA to develop a customized strategy designed to capitalize on the existing departmental efforts and to further build its capacity. The CNA team helped the department to identify technical assistance opportunities related to the principles of precision policing.

## Peer-to-Peer Exchange with the Seattle Police Department

Through SNPPI, the Lowell Police Department conducted a peer exchange with the Seattle Police Department (SPD) to look at their crime and social networking analysis capabilities. During the visit, Superintendent Taylor and his staff observed a CompStat Session and exchanged ideas on using social media to both provide real-time information, and to further strengthen trust with the community. During the visit to Seattle, the LPD learned how SPD was utilizing various tools to collect data on problem-solving activities that would not normally be reported in an incident. The LPD took this information back and adapted it to fit the department. The LPD now uses a tool that allows officers to easily report their problem-solving activities, which are also then automatically sent to their analysts. This information is now incorporated into the biweekly CompStat meetings. LPD also met with the Albany Police Department to exchange information about lessons learned and best practices related to school resource officer programs and policy development processes. ▀

## CONCLUSION

The LPD has fully embraced the goals of SNPPI and serves as a strong example of how a police department can transform its culture to one where service truly comes before self. Since the early 1990s, LPD has embraced crime prevention and enforcement strategies that center on interagency partnerships with law enforcement and community stakeholders. Nearly 30 years since the adoption of the Lowell Way, this commitment can be seen in the department's work as an SNPPI site. LPD's approach to crime reduction and

“The TTA the LPD received through the SNPPI has been extremely valuable in assisting our Crime Analysis and Intelligence Unit in developing enhanced analytical tools. Additionally, the Media Relations and Social Media training that was provided will assist the LPD in connecting directly to the citizens we serve, which will be extremely valuable.

— William Taylor, Superintendent



promotion of public safety is research based and community involved. The adoption of such strategies as problem-solving teams and new gang reduction strategies has reduced crime and improved the quality of life in Lowell. These and other initiatives are transforming the community and demonstrate the difference that morally informed law enforcement agency leadership can make.

Access to programs such as SNPPI helps provide the necessary resources and technical assistance to departments that seek to implement strategic approaches to crime reduction and community safety. When subject matter experts and analysts provide the tools, resources, and information to support operational and policy challenges, police agencies have time to focus on reducing crime and increasing public safety and trust. SNPPI has provided funding for peer site visits to Seattle and Albany, which allowed LPD leaders to see new strategies, innovative technologies, and improved training in action at similar agencies. ▀

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