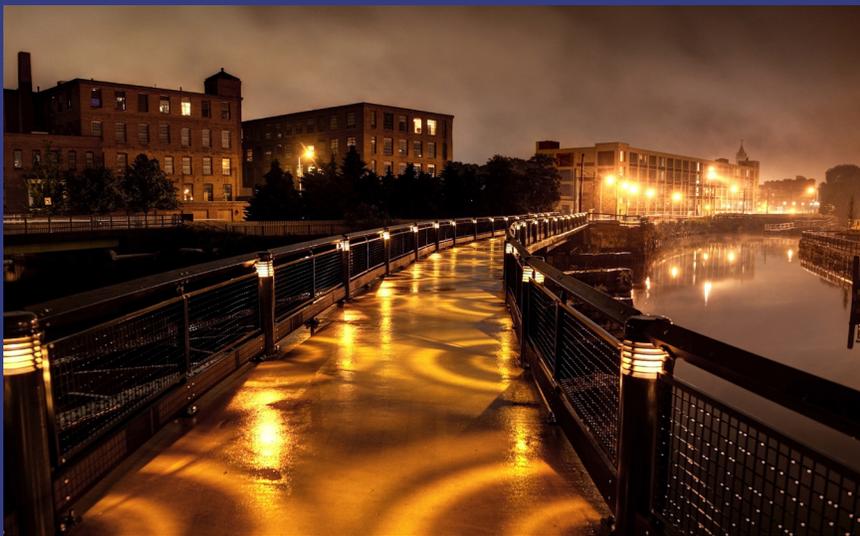


Safer Neighborhoods through Precision Policing Initiative

LOWELL (MASSACHUSETTS) POLICE DEPARTMENT



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Introduction

The Lowell (Massachusetts) Police Department (LPD) is one of 15 law enforcement agencies selected to participate in the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) 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, establish productive interagency partnerships** with law enforcement and community stakeholders, and **implement innovative and effective technologies** to assist police departments 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, implementing, coordinating, and delivering technical assistance. CNA worked with the LPD to develop a customized strategy to capitalize on the great work already in progress across the four policing principles. 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 training and technical assistance (TTA) opportunities and additional tools and resources to enhance areas related to the principles of precision policing. The CNA team documented these best practices and will share these initiatives with police departments nationwide to promote public safety.

Background

Beginning in the 1990s, the LPD adopted a policing approach centered on problem solving and partnerships, which has transformed the nature of crime fighting in the city. The LPD’s mission is to work with the community and with 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.

Table 1. Violent crimes in Lowell, 2013–2017

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Murder and nonnegligent manslaughter	4	6	0	0	1
Aggravated assault	328	372	249	212	144
Forcible rape	35	26	25	19	6
Robbery	192	183	143	127	146

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, which emphasizes problem solving, enforcement, and improved public safety. The current superintendent,

William Taylor, has worked closely with interagency and community partners to reduce the city's overall and violent crime rates. Since 2013, property crime¹ has been reduced by 47 percent and violent crime² by 48 percent (see table 1 on page 2). Notably, there has been only one homicide in the city since 2015.

Impacts of the opioid crisis

Despite this progress, the Lowell community experiences significant challenges from the public health crisis of opioid addiction. Although the opioid crisis has taken a toll on Massachusetts and the United States in general, its effects have been particularly devastating in Lowell. In 2016, there were 69 opioid-related deaths³ and, according to the LPD's Smart Policing Action Plan, 687 nonfatal opioid overdoses in the city. Opioid abuse has affected the entire community, not just individuals with substance use disorders and their families. Evidence suggests that many recent property and violent crimes in Lowell were associated with the epidemic.

Addressing gang-involved youth

In addition to the challenges associated with the opioid crisis, Lowell experiences persistent challenges from youth gangs, which emerged with the rapid increase in Latino and Southeast Asian immigration since the 1980s. Youth gangs aggressively target and recruit immigrant juveniles with limited English language skills using the promise of increased acceptance and security. A 2006 research study found that 19 active youth gangs in Lowell were responsible for nearly 50 percent of violent gun-related crime in the city.⁴ While the violence associated with these gangs has decreased since Lowell implemented at Project Safe Neighborhoods strategy targeting such violence in 2002, gangs remain a powerful influence in Lowell's immigrant communities.

1. The LPD reports crimes based on the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS); property crimes include Arson, Burglary/Breaking and Entering, Theft from a Building, Theft from a Motor Vehicle, Theft of Motor Vehicle Parts/Accessories, Stolen Property, and Vandalism.

2. Violent Crimes include Murder, Forcible Rape, Robbery, and Aggravated Assault.

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. A.A. Braga, J. McDevitt, and G.L. Pierce, "Understanding and Preventing Gang Violence: Problem Analysis and Response Development in Lowell, Massachusetts," *Police Quarterly* 9, no.1 (2006): 20–46.

Identifying Promising Strategies to Reduce Crime

The LPD uses enforcement, intervention, and prevention campaigns to reduce the presence and impact of ethnic youth gangs in the city. The LPD's gang unit is composed of bilingual officers who are fluent in Spanish or one of multiple Southeast Asian languages to specifically address the backgrounds of gang members. In addition to enforcing gang-related offenses and identifying 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 run summer camps in the city.

The LPD 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, aimed at children in grades 5 through 8, focuses on gang prevention, leadership, and life skills in a police academy context. More than 3,200 youth have graduated from the Lowell Student Police Academy.⁵

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 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.

5. "Student Police Academy," City of Lowell, accessed August 1, 2018, www.lowellma.gov/233/Student-Police-Academy.

The Lowell Way is integrated into policing efforts at every level of the 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; rather, they are strengthened through active partnerships between law enforcement and community stakeholders. The LPD has prioritized developing partnerships in its efforts to improve community safety and develop solutions for the complex causes of crime. The following sections describe some recent initiatives rooted in strong relationships with other public agencies and the community.

Community Opioid Outreach Program (CO-OP)

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

1. Intervention targeting overdose victims
2. An 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, Trinity Emergency Medical Service, and the Lowell House (an addiction treatment service organization). Members from these stakeholders make up the Community Opioid Outreach Program (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 victim and connects them with the appropriate intensive intervention and counseling programs.

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

These immediate 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 CO-OP 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 LPD. These challenges include mistrust of police based on previous interactions in the countries they emigrated from, lack of 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. Khun holds regular orientation tours at the LPD headquarters for recent immigrants. These tours help create a connection between the police and new residents and are crucial to inform people about the various units within the LPD, how to report a crime, and, more specifically, about domestic violence laws and the rights of victims.



Safe Summer Community Movie Nights

The LPD also actively develops opportunities to increase communication between the department and the wider community. In 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 LPD 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, with meetings 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 to report back to the department on community members' concerns.

Lessons Learned from SNPPI

Through SNPPI, the 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 identify training and technical assistance opportunities related to the principles of precision policing.

Peer exchange with the Seattle and the Albany Police Departments

Through SNPPI, the LPD conducted a peer exchange with the Seattle (Washington) 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 provide real-time information and to further strengthen trust with the community. During the visit to Seattle, the LPD learned how the SPD uses various tools to collect data on problem-solving activities that would not normally be reported in an incident. The LPD adapted this information to fit their department. The LPD now uses a tool that allows officers to easily report their problem-solving activities, which are then automatically sent to their analysts. This information is now incorporated into the biweekly CompStat meetings. LPD members 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 put service before self. Since the early 1990s, the 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. The LPD's approach to crime reduction and promotion of public safety is research based and community involved. The adoption of 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 seeking to implement strategic approaches to crime reduction and community safety. SNPPI provided funding for peer site visits to Seattle and to Albany, New York, which allowed LPD leaders to see new strategies, innovative technologies, and improved training in action at similar agencies. 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.



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