

How Bike Patrols Can Improve Campus Safety

Public safety cyclists model safe cycling behavior for students, effectively manage crowds at sporting events and augment campus community policing efforts.

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Police and security officers can patrol campuses on bicycles all year long -- even in the winter. Photo courtesy IPMBA

Anyone who spends even a few minutes at a college or university soon realizes how prevalent bicycles are on a campus. Reasons vary from economics to convenience, from versatility to effectiveness, to just plain fun. Whatever the reason, a campus' pedestrian-friendly design makes cycles the ideal conveyance for fast and easy personal transportation. The reasons they work so well for students and staff are the same reasons they work so well for campus police and security.

Police first began using mountain bikes in Seattle to combat the gridlock of a downtown construction project. They soon learned that the bikes brought them quickly and easily to places they never dreamed of policing in their squad cars. As a result, arrests went up and crime went down. Those with a penchant for committing crimes found it more difficult to find places the police couldn't or wouldn't go. In addition, the bike officers reported a greatly enhanced ability to interact with the public in a way never possible while patrolling in a car. Positive contacts increased exponentially, and the reaction to the bike officers was welcoming.

The effectiveness of police and security using mountain bikes was proven beyond question. City police and college campus public safety departments soon replaced foot beats with bike patrols. Others added bikes to the back of police cars to combine alternative patrol and response methods to the conventional ones. In most instances, bike patrol led to almost instant success.

Bike Patrols Encourage Safe Cycling

In an environment with a significant cycling population, putting police/security on bikes places officers in the midst of the community's primary mode of transportation. Trained officers encourage safe cycling behavior by setting a positive example. They also enforce cycling laws and ordinances, increasing safety for all roadway and campus facility users. Traffic in and around campus areas is historically dangerous for cyclists, pedestrians and motorists alike. Bike officers who ride correctly and enforce laws both targeting and protecting cyclists have an impact on overall traffic safety on and around the campus.

In pedestrian zones, which are present on practically all college campuses, patrol cars are impractical for all but the most serious calls. Mountain bikes enable trained officers to quickly and easily reach most areas, including tunnels, skyways and even inside buildings where motor vehicles could never reach. As a result, response times are significantly reduced.

Most campuses have hidden or out-of-the-way places, like alleys and trails, which enable troublemakers because police/security in patrol cars can't easily reach them. Mountain bikes make access easy, even if they have to be carried or pushed a short distance. Trouble will have to find another place to take root.

Mountain bikes can be used in less conventional methods of patrol as well. Plainclothes personnel riding unmarked or disguised bikes can ride or "hang out" in target areas while blending in with the community. Officers are able to observe and survey an area for particular crimes or problems, or wait for particular people. Equipment can be carried in the same sort of backpack seen everywhere on campus. The bike enables the officer to either move in quickly to make an arrest or continue surveillance on the move while summoning uniformed officers.

For campuses embracing the concepts and goals of community policing, bike patrol, used correctly, is one of the most effective tools in the community policing "toolbox." The increased presence and accessibility of the officers encourages positive contacts and interactions with all members of the campus community. And for those striving for a "greener" environment, police bikes fit the bill.

Bike officers are also uniquely qualified to combat the growing problem of bike theft. Some campuses, including the University of Wisconsin-Madison, have successfully used GPS-equipped "bait" bikes to target and reduce bicycle thefts. They report arresting nearly 50 people in the first couple years of the program. Using bike officers to provide both surveillance and arrest teams during these initiatives works well.]

BRTs Effectively Control Crowds

Within the past decade, police have discovered yet another effective use for patrol bikes: crowd management at political and sporting events. Called Bicycle Response Teams (BRTs), or "Bert" for short, they have made a noticeable difference in the ability of trouble makers to move about and function unimpeded. While first used primarily at high-profile political events, BRT methods

have increasingly been adopted by regional incident response teams and smaller agencies, including campus departments.

In the spring of 2011, Virginia Commonwealth University's (VCU) basketball team advanced to "The Final Four." Twice during VCU's run, students used the games as an excuse to cause trouble. After their final loss to Butler University, a large group of students gathered around campus. A small group started fires and set off fireworks. What followed were assorted acts of violence and property destruction by a few people. It was made worse and more dangerous by the larger group there to egg them on.

VCU Police employed many of their resources, including bike teams, to control the crowds and violence. Even without specialized training and tactics, the bikes proved effective, but not nearly as effective as they could have been with adequate numbers and the specialized BRT methods available through the International Police Mountain Bike Association (IPMBA).

Officers Must Receive Training

There may be some truth to the old saying "It's just like riding a bike", but when it comes to the level of skill required of public safety cyclists, the fact is that cycling skills are perishable. If you don't use or practice them, you will lose them. And if you were never trained how to perform the skills needed to ride a public safety bike professionally, that adage simply doesn't apply.

Just as civilian driving and emergency vehicle operation are different, so too is police/security cycling different from regular bike riding. Officers need to be able to ride safely and legally in all types of traffic conditions. They must be able to ride slowly and precisely through crowds of people, on sidewalks (where legal and when necessary) and through parking areas. They must be able to negotiate urban obstacles, ride up and down curbs and stairs, and avoid a seemingly endless variety of hazards. Proper training reduces the risk of falls and injuries to both the cyclists and those around them. It teaches them how to employ the bicycle tactically and technically in a wide range of scenarios.

Without training, bike officers are likely to ride around like other cyclists, doing mostly public relations and getting exercise. Once they know how to use the "tool" effectively, good, self-motivated officers will use it to its utmost advantage.

As many college and university public safety agencies have already discovered, a campus is the near perfect environment for police/security bikes, and bikes are the near-perfect vehicle for both routine patrol and rapid response. The positive contacts officers experience on bike patrol are a benefit no other patrol vehicle can duplicate. Take a look around a college campus for even a little while and you learn what the others there have figured out – bikes are the answer.