

Bicycle Patrols Versus Car Patrols

by Chris Menton, Associate Professor

Roger Williams University

How do police bicycle patrols compare with police motor patrols? In this study, both were observed under similar conditions in five cities with populations of more than 100,000. All contact the police officers had with the public was recorded and coded. The results show that a higher amount of contact with the public was experienced by police officers patrolling on bicycles.

In characterizing the contacts, the seriousness and tenor of these contacts were coded. The rate of serious contacts including arrests, vehicle impoundments and the like were comparatively similar for both modes of patrol. In some cases, response time and response capability was clearly superior for bicycle patrols, while often the use of bicycles was not an integrated component of a district's patrol strategy.

Observations of both police motor patrol units and by trailing bicycle patrols were conducted in: Boston; Charlotte, NC; Hartford, CT; Providence, RI and Washington, DC. Almost all of the shifts observed were second shifts: 3 p.m. to 11 p.m. or 4 p.m. to midnight and sometimes extended from as early as 2 p.m. to later than 3 a.m. Observations were recorded for 16 shifts of motor patrols and 16 shifts of bicycle patrols. The total numbers for data collection were 110 and 114 hours for autos and bicycles, respectively. Observation in motor patrols, also known as ride-alongs, usually consisted of observing one officer, but on a number of shifts, there were two officers. Bicycle patrol units would vary in number of officers from one to 10. The usual number of officers on a bicycle patrol team was two.

In sheer numbers, bicycle patrols had much more contact with members of the public than did car patrols. This may not be a particular surprise, yet no prior counts such as these could be found. In the average hour, a patrol car would have 3.3 contacts with the public, while bicycle patrols had 7.3 contacts with the public. The average number of people in contact with the police per hour was 10.5 for motor patrols and 22.8 for bicycle patrols. This information tells us simply that the activity level of police officers on bicycles is higher than that of the officers in cars. Yet, the issue begs the question, "What kind of contact is this?"

In classifying the character of contacts in serious, somewhat serious and non-serious categories, we can glean that first, bicycle patrols have a significantly higher amount of non-serious contacts with the public. This might lead to the belief that motor patrols handle serious time-consuming calls and bicycles are relegated to public relations. The data seems to indicate differently.

Serious contacts, taken alone for both modes of patrol, were not significantly different. This means the number of serious contacts by a police officer on a bicycle are similar to the number a police officer will have in a car. Granted, police officers on bicycles are not particularly effective in car chases and traversing long distances to respond to a call, but neither of those actions happened frequently. Yet there are some clear tactical advantages that bicycles do possess.

Before considering these tactical advantages, the issue of radio calls was also included in the data that was recorded. All contacts were classified by whether they were a result of a radio call or the contact was initiated on the spot. Radio calls were given to motor patrols at a rate nine times higher than they were given to bicycle patrols. In spite of that fact, bicycle patrol numbers in dealing with serious incidents, arrests, auto impoundments, and responses to serious crimes, were not significantly different than that those of automobile patrols. Oftentimes, the radio calls that the bicycle patrol officers did answer were general calls that were sent out to "any available unit" and not specifically assigned to them.

The stealth of police bicycle patrols is often cited as a distinctive tactical advantage. This was observed in a coordinated convergence in a housing complex on an apartment that was suspected to be carrying on illegal activity. The problem reported by the motor patrol officer whose sector the complex was in, was that automobile entrance to the complex was far enough away from the specific apartment that a lookout would see the police pull in and simply close the door. Three bicycle patrol officers came in from the opposite direction, one apartment away, on a footpath and confronted a man with drugs in his hand standing in the front door of the apartment. Certainly the issue of stealth is an important one.

But the tenor of bicycle policing is something that needs to be considered. Surely there is less drama of bicycles rolling up without a sound. Bicycle patrol officers can quickly get themselves into the context of a situation. This allows for more effective response. The dynamics of not having to park the car, get out of it, adjust your gunbelt and walk over to the situation provide for a whole different set of circumstances. There is no time to hide the joint or the open container, as well as other issues ranging from quality of life to serious crimes.

More analysis of this data and more examination of the issue of bicycle policing needs to happen. Currently, two issues seem to stand out beyond what the data is indicating. The first is radio calls and related technologies. One of the true advantages of the current patrol car is the onboard computer allowing for quick license plate and ID checks. It does not seem unreasonable that this kind of technology can be reduced to a BlackBerry-type device in some sort of shock-proof case, thus providing the bicycle patrol officer with the same powerful information-gathering tool that motor patrols currently have.

The second issue is the identity of bicycle patrols. Where do bicycle patrols sit within the deployment of department patrols in general? In some cases, the prestige of the bicycle is very high when used in saturation patrols with technical precision, dealing with disorders and crowds, as well as providing a show of force in troubled areas. Yet often, the bicycle patrols observed had been marginalized, excluded from radio calls except very low priorities with no expectation for them to provide backup for other calls, although the police on bicycles often did provide backup.

Some departments contacted honestly admitted that they did not have enough bicycle patrols going out to assure enough observation opportunities consistent with the study's parameters.

It has been said that the computer is like a bicycle for the mind. We can invert that question and ask ourselves, what does that make the bicycle? The bicycles are an incredible enhancement of human physical capabilities.

Through professional organizations such as the International Police Mountain Bike Association and the Law Enforcement Bicycle Association, and through experience, the bicycle patrol officers maintain a positive physical condition and has an optimum heart rate to deal with situations they encounter. One officer observed was 55 years old and seemed likely to be patrolling the most uneven hilly terrain of any patrols observed.

The same factor that makes the bicycle an advantage, its stealthiness and invisibility, is also its disadvantage in that it can be forgotten and discounted by police administrators. With our expectation of police officers to be exemplars, the multiple advantages of police bicycle patrols should be seriously considered and re-examined.

Chris Menton is an associate professor of criminal justice at Roger Williams University, School of Justice Studies. He is a retired corrections officer, a former criminal justice trainer and an avid bicyclist. He can be reached at pmenton@rwu.edu.

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