Utilizing Environmental Scanning to Assess the Impact of Homelessness on Police Operations: A case study of Panama City, Florida

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Abstract

Panama City has experienced an increase in their homeless population within the last several years. This situation has come to light because of the gentrification which has occurred within the downtown business district between the growing impacts of the nuisance behavior as well as the perceived blight placed on an area poised for revitalization. The fear is that it will continue to drive down the economic sustainability of the area. The police agency has been tasked with addressing the concern. This study focuses on assessing the impact this will have on police operations by understanding better the underlying causes endemic to the local homeless population. By doing this the department can hopefully develop a strategy for addressing this concern and mitigating this potential economic threat.

Introduction

Today many law enforcement agencies are faced with demands from their community to address the perception of public disorder, due to an increase of homeless populations within their districts. As a result, the first demand by cities constituents usually is for increased police presence to deal with this population and the associated nuisance offenses. These offenses often encompass such things as panhandling, public urination, trespassing, alcohol violations, loitering, shoplifting and drug dealing. Although there are many supporters of this initiative, there are also strong organized advocates that will champion the plight of this segment of the population and expect that police organizations take on the persona of a social worker rather than a control agent. As a result many police agencies are tasked with reallocating already stretched resources to balance this demand. Of concern for the future of police operations is the environmental factor, not consisting solely of the physical environment, but the impacts that may be experienced from social and demographic changes, economic trends, government and law changes, as well as changes in resources. There have been some initiatives in cities across the nation to address similar trends that have had some success, either real or perceived, on crime reduction. However there is limited study on how police operations can impact those conditions that may contribute to the cause of homelessness and its abatement. The city of Panama City has been impacted by this trend and the basis of this research is to conduct an environmental scan of those conditions which will have an impact on the future of this population and subsequently identify viable information that will provide a proposed strategy to effectively utilize police resources to best manage this trend.

Literature Review

Environmental Scanning

Environmental scanning is not a new topic and has been utilized in business, intelligence and other fields. For law enforcement or emergency management it can be defined as an "examination of factors with the potential to impact on the organization's environment at various levels and may take a short or long time frame" (Gillett, 1998). Most of this scanning is actually sorting through the available information, which is readily available to the general public. Sources can be composed of unclassified information and mass media sources (Gillett, 1998). Furthermore it can be said "our perspectives and behaviors relative to crime and justice are informed by larger changes taking place around us – socially, technologically, environmentally, economically and politically" (Meade, 2010). If we become informed of all the sources available, which will provide insight to the trends and developments that potentially can influence the future; we can be more intuitive on our strategy development.

Current trends

As a nation we are currently weathering an economic impact and trend that will certainly continue to affect the future of police operations for several years. Many departments have been faced with successive budget cuts over the last three (3) years Reductions both in operational budgets and manpower and that trend continues. through freezing of vacant positions and even layoffs by some agencies have occurred. Eric Meade, a futurist in his article in the July edition of The Futurist magazine said that the "economic crisis has driven budget cuts at the federal, state and local levels, which may reduce the effectiveness of crime prevention and control efforts" and "law enforcement agencies will likely find themselves being asked to do more with less" (Meade, 2010). Secondly shortages of natural resources as a result of environmental, political and economic factors elude that there will be an impact on law enforcement. Oil forecasts suggest that "after the economy recovers and energy demand returns to its earlier levels, declining supplies could send oil prices steeply higher over the next decade" and "agencies may respond by reducing patrol car use, shifting to more fuelefficient vehicles or assigning more officers to foot or bicycle patrols (Meade, 2010). Further analyses of these types of trends are necessary for police agencies to examine impacts on police resources and the level of services provided.

Homeless concern

Rising homeless populations in cities across the nation have prompted agencies to initiate a problem oriented and place-based strategy to reduce crime through focusing on disorder associated with homeless encampments. However even if there is a resulting reduction in crime, "there is little reason to expect that police interventions alone can change underlying social and economic factors that contribute to crime" (Berk, 2010). Taking a different approach, such as environmental scanning, could look at ways to establish partnerships that may have an influence on those factors beyond police control but contribute to the impact of their operation. Another factor that places

pressure on city leaders and law enforcement to respond is a process known as "Gentrification is a process of renewal and rebuilding that accompanies gentrification. an influx of middle-class or affluent people into deteriorating areas" (Doak, 2006). Whether the area is residential, business or mixed use the accompanying interest in development or revitalization will trigger this response. As a result of this response, the "homeless that are visible on the street become viewed as blight and that directly impacts the quality of life of the new residents" (Doak, 2006). The initial complaint about the homeless population made to the city of Panama City occurred within our downtown business area where there exists a downtown improvement board as well as two community redevelopment areas. As plans have moved forward to revitalize our downtown area the visible homeless have become a concern to both quality of life and economic sustainability. The public opinion focused first on the police department and what they were doing about the problem of what they term vagrancy. Much of the public outcry, at first, was for increased legislation and ordinances that address the nuisance behaviors often associated with this population. In light of the myriad of court cases over the last fifteen to twenty years many laws and ordinances have been declared unconstitutional or void for vagueness. State law and city ordinances were sufficient to address many of the crime concerns and there was no need for additional laws. Another locus of attention was on the existing downtown Rescue Mission and its work with many homeless people, coupled with the concern vocalized by residents of several zoning approval considerations to build low-income or subsidized housing in the city. As cited by Melissa Doak, "to many people the prospect of low-income, subsidized housing is synonymous with rising crime, falling property values and overcrowded classrooms. "This protest develops an effect known as Not in My Backyard" (Doak, 2006). Initially the response was to increase police presence to deter would be violators and arrest offenders. Typically associated with an increased presence and the resulting increased enforcement is a spike in arrests followed by a sharp decline, which can be perceived as crime reduction. However often times the reduction is due to displacement of those would be offenders to other areas with less police presence. "A common criticism for place-based policing strategies is that they are myopic and do not address the underlying causes of crime." (Berk, 2010). One such underlying cause associated with a large percentage of the homeless population is the use and abuse of alcohol and/or illicit drugs. "Alcoholism is well known to affect homeless people. It has been reported to affect 53%-73% of homeless adults" (Podymow, 2006). As a result there is a higher incident of police encounter and use of emergency services. Preliminary self-report surveys of homeless in Panama City conducted in 2010 by the Panama City Police Department shows that of the 114 surveyed, 63 percent indicated that a presenting problem for them was alcohol and/or drug abuse. Of the 252 police contacts during the same time period with homeless in Panama City 25 percent of them had been charged with some type of offense. What is of more significance is that 36 percent of those charges were for alcohol related offenses. As cited by Podymow in his article, Shelter-based managed alcohol administration to chronically homeless people addicted to alcohol, "although treatment with detoxification and abstention is the best option from a health perspective, the likelihood of rehabilitation among people both alcoholic and homeless is low" (Podymow, 2006). For most police agencies their available response is to either charge with a criminal offense or take them into

protective custody for detoxification. It does not address the other conditions that may be present and exacerbating their alcoholism. Economically these contacts and utilization of services can prove to be very costly to the taxpayers. A study by the Center for Problem Oriented Policing found that "following 15 chronically homeless people in San Diego ... that they cumulatively received more than \$3 million worth of public services in just 18 months. Despite benefiting from \$200,000 in taxpayerprovided services during this time, each was still homeless" (Chamard, 2010). Panama City Police Department in their initial increase of police presence and study of the problem through surveys has expended almost \$57,000 in overtime. Of greater concern is the amount of expenditure the city and taxpayers will incur as a result of an increasing homeless population and diminishing social resources which in turn increase the utilization of police resources.

Methods

Currently Bay County has roughly 378 identified unsheltered homeless individuals within its geographical boundaries, of which officers with the Panama City Police Department have had contact to date with at least 252. These numbers reflect the most recent Point in Time Survey that was conducted by the Homeless Coalition and documented contact by officers. Based on this population this study examined a convenience sample of fifty-three individuals who have been identified as unsheltered and either currently having their case managed by the city funded adult homeless caseworker or utilizing the Panama City Rescue Mission. This will represent 21% of the identified population. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with each of these participants. A defined set of questions, in the form of a survey, examined their length of homelessness, current income status and source, whether there were other concerns exacerbating their homelessness (i.e. drug and alcohol addiction, medical or mental health concerns, etc.) their time in Panama City, what brought them to Panama City, whether they desired to mitigate their homelessness, what was their perceived most critical obstacle to mitigating their homelessness and the nature of police contact during their time in Panama City. Some potential weaknesses that may exist with this type of method is that when conducting face-to-face interviews the participants may feel reluctant to disclose sensitive information and may not fully answer or refuse to answer the survey questions. Furthermore they may underreport or inflate their condition or status associated with these types of questions. Participants were identified only by their first name, gender, race and age category. Because of the sensitive nature of the questions if there was a reluctance to answer in a face-to-face fashion they were offered a printed-paper survey that asked the same questions. Neither of the surveys asked for their full name or personal identification information to provide anonymity and hopefully reduced reluctance to answer the survey questions. A brief statement about the purpose of the survey was provided encouraging that they answer the survey questions as accurately as possible to help provide an accurate assessment of prevalent conditions within the survey group. The answer to the surveys were entered into survey monkey during the face-to-face interviews and manually entered for those who chose the printed form at the completion of their survey. Also examined were calls for service and arrest data obtained by the Panama City Police Department from July 1, 2010 to

June 30, 2011 to determine the impact that the population has on calls for service volume and arrests.

Survey Results

The initial question from the survey was simply to ask the first name of the respondent creating an opportunity for the surveyor to introduce themselves to begin to create a dialogue and rapport with them on a first name basis, as well as briefing them that the purpose of the survey was to explore the underlying causes and symptoms of their homelessness. The second question was designed to get general demographic data such as race, sex and age category. The following chart is indicative of that demographic summary.

RACE	% of respondents
White	79.2%
Black	15.1%
Other	5.7%
AGE	
18-29	26.4%
30-39	26.4%
40-49	17%
50-59	28.3%
60-69	1.9%
SEX	
Male	56.6%
Female	43.4%

TABLE 1 Demographic s of Respondents

The homeless population demographic is closely aligned with Panama City's 2006 census data for race, age and sex. This should reflect a homeless population consistent with the general population characteristics of the city and therefore not a reflection of racial, gender or age inequality. The second question within the survey focused on the amount of the respondent's current monthly income in which 92.5% of them responded. The following table is representative of those findings.

Monthly income	Less than \$500	\$500 to \$999	\$1000 to \$1999	\$2000 or more
% of Respondents	69.4%	28.6%	2%	0%

With 2006 census data showing that the per capita income level was \$17,830 per year or roughly \$1485 per month, based on the survey only 2% of the respondents are at or near that level with the remaining 98% being below what would be considered the poverty line. This could be a representation that there is a large amount of unemployment or underemployment among those who are homeless. So therefore one would expect to see that employment would be an overwhelming concern to mitigation of their homelessness.

The next question of the survey only 75.4% of the sample was willing to answer the question about the source of their reported income and the most notable source of income was food stamps. What is unique about this answer is that 35% of them viewed this as a source of income, even though this source was simply to fulfill a basic necessity of life. The next largest source reported was employment at 22.5%, again suggestive of a state of large unemployment or underemployment numbers among homeless. Some 15% reflected that they are receiving SSI benefits which would be indicative that those respondents are more than likely basing their low income on some form of disability. Interesting to note is that 10% of those surveyed admitted to panhandling as the source of their income even though they knew that there was a city ordinance prohibiting such activity. This could either be suggestive of an effective deterrence to the greater number of the population to not commit this offense, or a significant reluctance on the part of the respondent to admit to such activity. For further examination of reported sources see Appendix A.

Questions 5 and 8 examined how long they had been homeless and how long they had been in Panama City to determine whether or not the numbers were a reflection that the homeless were displaced Bay County residents or where migration from other areas was occurring. These numbers are reflected in Appendix B. The findings showed significant numbers in two categories, those being respondents who were homeless and/or in Panama City for 6 months or less and those who are homeless and/or in Panama City for 2 years or more. There were 50.9% of the respondents indicating being homeless for less than 6 months and 36.5% indicating that they had come to Panama City within the last 6 months. Both of these numbers may reflect that there is a growing homeless population within the city limits of Panama City with either more than half of the respondents being recently displaced or greater than a third relocating here. These would be of significant concern not only to those concerned with downtown revitalization and unwanted blight created by their presence, but police operations as well. The effect on police operations would be an increase in calls for service because of the public fear and perception upon seeing this segment of the population wandering the streets, as well as the taxing of already strained resources upon the department due to unfunded positions. Secondly those that have been homeless for more than 2 years was 34% and almost 54% of those surveyed having been in Panama City for more than 2 years. This represents two concerns, the first being that more than a third of this population has had long term homelessness without mitigation which could lead to a greater propensity to commit offenses to meet their daily needs and the second concern being that more than half of the population has been homeless residing in Panama City itself and not being transitioned back to normal residential living. The concern of that effect on police operations could be seen in repeat calls for service for the same individuals, increased arrests due to either more

offenses being committed or less discretion used by officers in dealing with these subjects repeatedly. Also of concern on the impact of police operations is a growing need for coordinated social services to examine and assess these cases and provide long term case management to reintegrate them back into residential living.

Question 6 of the survey asked what other conditions, other than being homeless, that may be present and restraining their ability to successfully transition back to residential living. Appendix C represents those findings and the two most notable underlying conditions are alcohol/chemical dependency and mental illness. The total percentage of cases with alcohol and/or some type of chemical dependency was 28.8% and those with mental illness were 21.2%. Here there are several considerations for the impact on police operations. First is that there will be a higher potential of violence or injury to officers having to respond and interact with these subjects or the public that may encounter them. Secondly in light of the downturned economy and reduction of funding, both federally and at the state level, in human services these resources are not going to be able to meet the increasing demand of a growing homeless population with these conditions. This will also increase the calls for service because they are out on the street rather in a treatment facility. The alcohol and chemically dependent will also increase the potential for offenses to be committed such as the drug offenses, panhandling, theft and burglary to obtain the item that is the source of their addiction.

Question 8 examines the reason that a person came to Panama City. The most cited reason among those that responded to this question was a friend or relative. This could be indicative that those coming here are displaced from other areas and looking for a connection to a support person or group to help them deal with their Only 10% of the respondents indicated that the reason they came to homelessness. Panama City was due to the Rescue Mission. Although many of the subjects interviewed were located at the Rescue Mission hanging out in the Day Center, they did not indicate that it is the initial reason for relocation. This suggests that once here they will naturally gravitate to where basic needs i.e. food and shelter will be located and begin to congregate in that area. Based on that premise the concern to police operations will be the number of displaced people, after feeding hours and the available beds are filled, who will begin their search to find those basic needs. When those needs are not readily accessible they will resort to other activities such as trespassing, camping in violation of city ordinance, or seek to be involved in activities to "medicate" their depression.

Question 9 examined what the level of contact they have had with the police department. Of the respondents, 49% indicated that they had been arrested, 33.3% stopped and questioned and 29.4% trespassed. A further examination of this will be discussed in correlation with data obtained on calls for service and arrest data for the last 12 months at the Panama City Police Department.

The last question in the survey was to find out what they considered was their most critical need to not be homeless. 61% indicated that employment was their most critical need and 12.2% indicated that obtaining their birth certificate or identification card was necessary for them to obtain employment. This correlates back to question 3 and the large amount of respondents being below the poverty line. Roughly 17% indicated obtaining their VA, social security or disability benefits and some 7% of

respondents indicated that they needed transportation back to a friend or relative who could provide shelter. Collectively these all indicate a need for coordinated social services to provide direct assistance and benefits to helping this population mitigate their homelessness. Secondly of those surveyed only 2.4% indicated addiction treatment was needed. This is not surprising since most people who are addicted don't admit that there is a problem or they feel that they are able to manage such addiction, especially in light that in question 6 there were 28.8% admitting to alcohol and/or chemical addiction. None of those surveyed indicated that they wished to remain homeless.

Discussion

In the 12-month period between 07/01/10 and 06/30/11 the Panama City Police Department has responded to two locations frequently regarding activities of the homeless. The first being the Rescue Mission for a total of 504 calls for service generating 72 arrests and the Grocery Outlet for a total of 287 calls for service which generated 62 arrests. To put this in perspective officers made a total of 467 arrests within the geographic zone associated with these two businesses known as 4C. In other words 28.7% of the total arrests within the zone were at these two locations which includes the southern part of the downtown business district where many of the complaining owners operate their businesses. The adjacent zone to the north, zone 4B, which is the northern half of the downtown business district accounted for a total of 265 arrests or 43.25% fewer arrests. Another source of reference for perspective is that the Rescue Mission occupies an area of .56 acres and reported to house between 65 to 70 people and feeding a reported 800 meals per day. Within the same time period the Panama City Police Department responded to the Panama City Mall for a total of 259 calls for service which occupies an area of approximately 44 acres with thousands of shoppers daily resulting in only 25 arrests. Also a review of the calls for service within a half-mile radius of the Rescue Mission for the same time period indicated that a total of 7,537 calls for service were answered by the department or 14.1% of the 53,323 total calls for service for the same time period. Furthermore officers made a total of 3,948 arrests for the same time period in the entire city jurisdiction which incorporates 24 So for the two downtown business' geographic zones the geographic zones. cumulative 732 arrests account for roughly 18.5% of the overall arrests. Considering a mean of the 24 geographic zones to be 164.5 arrests, then the geographic zone around the Rescue Mission accounts for 284% more arrests. The northern business corridor zone accounts for 161% more arrests than the median. As can be seen the impact that the homeless population has on police operations and arrests is significant. So what does this mean in an economic sense? If you account that the average response to a call that results in arrest, the resulting transport, booking and reporting time at an average of 54 minutes based on the base salary of a beginning officer alone would cost the Panama City Police Department \$13.58 per arrest. Of course if you account for benefits, fuel and maintenance costs the cost would rise to approximately \$26.00 per arrest. Based on the mean arrests this would result in a cost of \$4,277 dollars. Based on the numbers of arrests for the geographic zone 4C this cost would increase to \$12,142 dollars. When applying a rate for a call for service without the arrest and

transport the cost per call would lower to approximately \$15.00 per call. This would equate to \$106,050 for the remaining 7,070 calls within this geographic zone. In comparison to a mean of 2,221 calls per geographic zone the cost for answering calls less those including arrests would be \$30,848. The financial impacts are significant if you consider that based on the survey respondents there appears to be an increasing homeless population for both those recently displaced and those recently relocating to this area.

Recommendations

Clearly there is a need for more study into the homeless concern and what to specifically due to mitigate this issue. Without some plan in place there is only going to be a further taxing of existing resources, especially for the police agency. For consideration to address the problem I would recommend that an approach which utilizes education, enforcement and partnership would be the best strategy. First we need to continue our education efforts in defining for the public the concerns surrounding homelessness, its underlying causes that exacerbates their condition and the need to mitigate this issue; otherwise it will continue to drive up demands on taxpayers to provide funding for services especially in light of diminishing health and human service resources. Even in light of the calls for service level and number of arrests discussed, many of the contacts between the police and homeless do not result in arrest so we need to make sure the public does not criminalize someone simply for being homeless. Partnership will be key component here. Panama City has provided supporting funding within the last six months for an adult caseworker. During the last 6 months there have been 36 referrals to the caseworker for management of which she has placed 31 successfully into housing and employment. Currently the city leadership is exploring a partnership with the local health department, social service organizations and churches to build a community resource center to provide a "one-stop" location for better coordinated services to help manage the existing homeless population and transition them back to residential living. Also the addition of a Homeless Management Information System among some of these agencies has helped reduce potential for duplication of services or abuse of the existing resources. This resource center will be able to provide that information system to all participants to further help reduce unnecessary expenditures of funds thereby increasing the number of people that can be serviced. As can be seen by preliminary surveys and the surveys conducted face to face there is a portion of the homeless population that are involved in criminal activity. Here a coordinated enforcement effort that is coupled with case management during their incarceration may better be able to transition some of this group out of their current activities. Currently the Bay County jail has an assigned case worker who is managing these cases and he has been able to transition some of this population into housing or assistance by obtaining their VA benefits or other rehabilitative benefits to help address the underlying causes which make their transition more difficult. A suggested avenue to explore would be a way to share information among the police agency, jail and courts to identify those chronic offenders and develop a strategy to allow sentencing times, consistent with state guidelines, which would also provide ample time for the social service assessments to take place. The Panama City Police Department has

developed and should continue its partnership in this endeavor to function as an integral component until a workable system is developed to best address this concern.

Captain Scott Ervin has been in law enforcement for over 18 years. He currently is serving as the Acting Deputy Chief of the Panama City Police Department. During his career he has worked in patrol, investigations, community services, traffic unit, training and recruitment.

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Survey of Homeless Persons in Panama City

1. What is your first name?



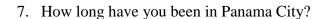
2. What is your race, gender and age category? (Circle one in each Category)

Race	<u>Gender</u>	Age Category
White	Male	18-29
Black	Female	30-39
Asian		40-49
American Indian		50-59
Other		60-69
		70+

- 3. What is your current monthly income?
 - □ Less than \$500
 - □ \$500 to \$999
 - □ \$1,000 to \$1,999
 - □ \$2,000 or more

- 4. What is the source of your income? (Mark all that apply)
 - **Employment**
 - **D** Retirement
 - Monthly settlement
 - □ Social Security
 - □ SSI
 - □ Panhandling
 - □ Relative/Friend
 - □ Other (please specify)

- 5. How long have you been homeless?
 - □ Less than 6 months
 - □ 6 mo. To 1 year
 - \Box 1 yr. To 2 yrs.
 - □ 2yrs. Or more
- 6. Do you have any of the following conditions in addition to being homeless? (Mark all that apply)
 - □ Alcohol dependency
 - □ Illegal drug dependency
 - □ Prescription drug dependency
 - Diagnosed long term or terminal illness
 - Diagnosed mental illness
 - □ Physical disability
 - $\Box \quad \text{None of the above}$
 - □ Other (please specify)



- \Box Less than 6 months
- \Box 6 mo. to 1 year
- \Box 1 yr. to 2 yrs.
- \Box 2yrs. or more

- 8. Why did you come to Panama City?
 - □ Been here all my life
 - □ Job opportunity
 - □ Friend/Relative
 - Rescue Mission
 - **□** Referred by another agency
 - **□** Released here from jail/prison
 - □ Social service availability
 - Other (please specify)

9. What has been your contact with the local police? (Mark all that apply)

- □ No contact
- Called police for assistance
- □ Police called by someone else
- □ Medical condition or welfare check
- Detoxed (public intoxication)
- □ Stopped and questioned
- □ Traffic stop
- □ Traffic accident
- □ Trespassed
- □ Arrested
- □ Other (please specify)
- 10. What do you believe is your most critical need to be met to help you get off the street and not be homeless?
- Addiction treatment
- □ Employment
- □ Medical care
- □ Mental health services
- Receiving social security or disability benefits
- Receiving VA benefits
- Obtaining birth certificate or identification card
- □ Transportation to family or friend who can provide shelter
- □ None I want to be homeless
- □ Other (please specify)

Appendix A

Table of Respondents Source of income (40 of 53 surveyed or 75.4% of sample)

SOURCE OF INCOME	# OF RESPONDENTS	% OF SAMPLE
Food Stamps	14	35%
Employment	9	22.5%
SSI	6	15%
Panhandling	4	10%
No source	3	7.5%
Social Security	2	5%
SSDI	1	2.5%
Welfare	1	2.5%
Total	40	100%

Appendix B

Table of length of homelessness and time in Panama City based on respondents.

Length	Homeless	In Panama City
Less than 6 months	27 / 50.9%	19 /36.5%
6 months to 1 year	6 / 11.3%	5 / 9.6%
<i>1year to 2 years</i>	2 / 3.8%	n/a
More than 2 years	18 / 34%	28 / 53.8%
Total	53 /100%	52 / 100%*

*1 refused to respond

Appendix C

Table of respondents self-admitted conditions in addition to their homelessness.

Condition	# of Respondents	Percentage of respondents
None	20	38.5%
Mental Illness	11	21.2%
Long term disability or	6	11.5%
illness		
Alcohol or Drug w/ Mental	5	9.6%
Illness		
Alcohol Dependency	4	7.7%
Alcohol/Illicit Drug	3	5.8%
dependency		
Prescription Drug	2	3.8%
dependency		
Illegal Drug Dependency	1	1.9%
Total	52	100%