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Bike Patrol

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bike patrol



As gasoline prices rise, the regular bicyclist will be finding more folks grasping the handlebars. Some of whom will be sporting a web belt with a gun and handcuffs. Their outfits will not have as much lettering as a weekend road rider, but their garb marks them as fundamentally different than practically every other cyclist: They are at work. Add to this that their work involves the application of social controls and the contrast becomes quite pronounced. Unlike the regular bicyclist, a policeman on a bicycle has the authority to deal with the illegalities of the individual motorist, pedestrian, or even someone on a bicycle.

Police bicycling is not a new phenomenon. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, officers and departments took pride in showing off their steel steeds. When cars came along, however, police were in the vanguard of automobile usage and set the bicycle aside. However, police bicycles never totally disappeared. As congestion increased and fuel prices spiked in the 1970s, a few major cities launched a limited use of bicycle patrols. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that by 2003 all major cities with populations over 100,000 had police departments with bicycles. This reveals little. Some police departments may be like many American households and have bicycles in the basement, dusty and barely usable in their current conditions.

Studying Police on Bicycles

As a professor of criminal justice, one course I regularly teach is Policing in America. It concerned me that the texts for this course had little to say about police bicycle patrols. Studies are cited that examined motor, foot and even horse patrol, but no bicycle patrols studies. I set out to find out what is going on with bicycle patrols. In observing the police use of bicycles, I found it to be modest and under-resourced, yet growing. In spite of bicycle patrols being discounted and underused, based on my research they outperform motor patrols.

In five cities, including Charlotte, N.C., Boston, Mass., Providence, R.I., Washington, D.C. and Hartford, Conn., ride-alongs were conducted. As might be expected, motor patrol ride alongs had been common; only a single department reported one prior bicycle ride along and it was for a short part of one shift. Data in my research was collected from 32 full shifts.

More than 1,100 encounters by the police with the public were recorded, coded and studied. Tactically the bicycles performed better. They could approach with stealth from unexpected directions and go places motor patrol offices might not know existed. Bicycles afford unfettered ability to observe and can be used as easily moveable barriers when directing crowds. Without any diminishment in police powers, officers on bicycles present a more approachable dimension of policing.

Police bicycle usage has grown to a point where bicycle patrols are a known phenomenon. Physical and mental advantages for the officer, superior tactical capabilities and statistically higher levels of interaction with the public head the litany of reasons to increase police bicycling.

By Dr. Chris Menton,
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Positive Reinforcement

As readers of this publication know, good bicycling is a craft, a demonstration of physical prowess and the art of finding the line. It should be no surprise that members of the public demonstrate an increased level of respect for the officer on a bicycle. People feel comfortable, grateful and able to approach police on bicycles. I was amazed to hear people shouting “thank you” as officers on bicycles rode by. I imagine the officers get a boost to their psyche from these positive reinforcements sent their way.

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capabilities and statistically higher levels of interaction with the public head the litany of reasons to increase police bicycling. Currently many police departments are reconsidering their modest commitment to bicycle patrols. Anecdotal information, experience, and logic cast bicycle patrols as a realistic partial alternative to many motor patrols. There are some obstacles.

What the Chiefs Think

A perception persists that the bicycle is a toy. Considering the mission of the police to exercise social control, people wonder if a bicycle is an appropriate means of conveyance. Recently, more than 100 New England police departments responded to the following question that

I asked them about bicycle patrols, “Do you anticipate increased use of bicycles because of increasing fuel costs?” This was in May when gasoline was still below four dollars a gallon. Many chiefs said they would increase bicycle use; more said they would not.

Although not asked, many respondents elaborated that having bicycle patrols was a luxury. The thought was that bicycles could be in addition to regular patrol resources, not as part of the regular deployment. The opinion was voiced that if supplemental funds were available, bicycles could be used. Chiefs who responded that they would not increase bicycle patrols seemed to view the obstacles to using bicycles as a regular part of their department’s deployment to be not worth the effort. If the chief believes bicycle patrols to be unable to substantially contribute to or inconsistent with the department’s mission, then bicycles will not be used. Many students and professionals in criminal justice have asked what the public thinks about bicycle patrols. I tell them it is more important to find out what the chiefs think, for they are the dominant influence in the ethos of their department.

Influencing Change

What a chief believes can be influenced. Police work for the people and generally do a very difficult job well. If we can get better performance at less cost from our peace officers, then we should. I envision substantial resources of public safety operations in dense residential and commercial areas noticeably increasing their bicycle usage. As this develops, skilled observant bicyclists will benefit. To facilitate the police bicyclist getting around, some pro bicycle infrastructure enhancements can be logically expected.

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The public in general is fascinated with the police and to some degree emulate police. Put more police on bicycles and more of the public will think to try this means of transport that is possibly more efficient. One impediment to this is the perception previously mentioned that a bicycle is a toy not a tool. Increased



bicycle use by the police and public means experienced bicyclists should redouble their efforts to blend with the flow of traffic, be minimally obtrusive and be exemplars.

Training is Key

My research has received some wider exposure than scholarship generally receives. The Associated Press, NBC News and many regional and trade media sources have an interest in police bicycling due to fuel cost. They generally struggle with the concept of police bicycle patrols and offer it up as a novelty. Professional organizations exist which support police bicycling. The International Police Mountain Bike Association and the Law Enforcement Bicycle Association are the largest. These and other police training organizations seek to properly prepare law enforcement personnel on how to use the bicycle in discharging their responsibilities. Not using adequate training and proper equipment is a recipe for failure for a po-

lice bicycle program. Community support of bicycle police patrols is often met with interest by local governments.

Looking Ahead

Years ago, *Bicycling Magazine* satirically printed ten reasons to not commute by bicycle. Reading the responses from police chiefs on why they would not increase the utilization of bicycle patrols reminded me of that list. With the size of communication equipment, defibrillators, and other essential equipment shrinking, many reasons not to use bicycle patrols are inaccurate. Issues of cost are questionable. Training and outfitting an officer for a bicycle patrol will not approach the upfront cost of a new cruiser. The comparative cost of upkeep and fuel alone make policing by bicycle a worthy alternative. •

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