



Partnership Required?

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Implementing standard operating guidelines, policies, and procedures is essential to maximizing the effectiveness of a bicycle unit. When crafting a policy or guidelines, it is important to strike a balance. The document should be detailed enough to provide guidance, but not so detailed as to be restrictive. It must be flexible enough to allow for continued operations even as conditions change.

One matter of policy that has garnered attention during the economic downturn is whether or not bike officers should be permitted to patrol alone. Staffing shortages have forced many agencies to assess whether or not bike patrol is the most effective use of limited personnel. A policy that requires bike officers to have partners often provides one more excuse to veto bike patrol!

The first question that arises with respect to solo bike patrol is that of officer safety. While this author was fortunate to be able to ride alone much of the time, it is necessary to acknowledge that there are some communities, or areas within them, that are just too crime-ridden and dangerous to allow bike officers – or any police officers– to patrol alone.

There is no question that bike patrol officers have numerous advantages over their patrol car cohorts. Bike officers are much more approachable to the public, enabling them to quickly gain the trust and respect of community members, and enhancing their ability to identify and solve problems. Through their uninhibited senses, they gain a heightened awareness of the community and detect crime more readily. Because of their stealthy nature and ability to roll up on crimes in progress, experienced criminals fear the unpredictable and swift bike officers more than most other types of police patrols.

Solo vs. Pairs

These reasons, coupled with the lack of protection afforded by a police car, have caused some agencies to require bike officers to ride with partners. While at first this may seem ideal, look critically at policies that prohibit officers from ever working bike patrol alone. They too often suppress bike patrol and with it, its multitude of benefits. Restrictive policies result in underutilization of many of the advantages that an intelligent and motivated bike officer, even working alone, brings to the community.

So what is the best way to determine whether to ride solo or with a partner? Common sense. Police agencies routinely use common sense in assessing what to allow. Police officers are expected to constantly use common sense and exercise good judgment.

If an officer in a police car would work a particular area alone, then why not an officer on a bike? What bike officers lack in the moving cover provided by a car, they often make up for in additional “intel” from sounds, voices and other cues as they approach the area. Would a car-bound cop go into a violent domestic or other potentially dangerous situation alone? Then neither should a bike officer. Back up is always nice to have. Sometimes you can wait for it,



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and sometimes you can't. That's why police work is dangerous. It doesn't really matter how you arrive on the scene!

Department administrators might throw the "L-word" out as a reason for prohibiting bike patrol with less than two officers. Ask your attorney, but it is doubtful that a department would have any real liability unless it is seriously negligent in training and equipment. Police work is always dangerous and dependent upon the individual decisions and actions of its personnel.

Departments can't always affect that, even if they provide quality training and equipment that is up-to-date as well as relevant and realistic.

Night Patrol

Some agencies have policies recommending that bike officers working in low-light conditions ride with a partner if at all possible. Others require it. Because every agency is unique, IPMBA has made no definitive recommendation in this regard. Perhaps the best policy is one which allows solo patrol during daytime hours, and strongly encourages a team of at least two officers for nighttime bike patrol.

Darkness obviously adds to the already stealthy nature of bike policing. Quite often bike officers will ride up onto incidents in progress without immediately realizing it. They may not have time to request a cover unit. While this happens in the daytime as well, nighttime and darkness only add to the suddenness and danger.

Bike officers go where patrol cars can't: into alleys, behind buildings, down trails, under bridges, and all the other places criminals lurk. If they fall and get hurt, or become injured some other way, darkness may prevent them from being seen or discovered. Car officers responding to a call for assistance will instinctively look first for the police car, and then start their search for the officer from there. Since bike officers usually have their bike with them, there is nothing obvious for back-up officers to look for. For these reasons, it is nice to have a cover officer omnipresent after dark.

Safety in Numbers?

A similar debate has been "raging" around law enforcement for years. Should patrol units be required to have two officers, or are single officer units okay? While two officers are perceived to be safer, some studies have found that officers working two-person units are more likely to be assaulted and are involved in altercations more often than officers working solo. Could it be that officers working alone act more cautiously and treat people differently? Don't they wait for cover officers when necessary? If so, why wouldn't bike officers working alone do so as well?

In recent years, the FBI's reports on officers killed have demonstrated that we can't always find safety in numbers. Incidents with multiple officers killed or injured by the same assailant suggest that "safety in numbers" may be a bit of a false premise. Recent events and incidents have too often shown us that despite the presence of multiple officers, LEOs can, and will, unfortunately, get hurt and killed in this often dirty and dangerous business of policing. Safety may be better enhanced through improved situational awareness, sound tactics and good judgment, all of which are possible when a bike officer is working solo.



In Conclusion

When it comes to setting guidelines for solo bike patrol, there is no “one size fits all.”

Policies, or guidelines, should be flexible enough to allow for the safe use of this valuable community-policing tool – bike patrol – as often as possible. One effective officer on bike patrol is still better than zero!

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