

Up & Rolling: What you must know to start or improve a police bike unit

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A 2003 Justice Department survey showed that 45% (5,695) of the U.S.'s 12,656 local police departments[1] and 16% (489) of the 3,061 sheriff's offices[2] routinely employed bikes on a full-time, part-time or occasional basis. Why do they use bikes to patrol their communities? Because bikes *work*.



Bikes are cost-effective, stealthy, clean and quick. They can be used alone or with a patrol vehicle. They're useful in nearly any environment, from traffic-choked urban streets to quiet residential areas, from parks and trails to crowded events and festivals—not to mention

their effectiveness as a rapid mobile strike-force during demonstrations and in other crowd-control situations.

If you ask any veteran bike officer why they love bike patrol, most will describe positive, personal contacts and the ability to patrol nearly anywhere. They'll also tell you about increased arrests and their community's appreciation. All will have great stories about riding up on crimes in progress, virtually unseen and unheard.

If your department doesn't have a bike team yet, it's not too late. You can make it happen.

Getting Started

Before starting, secure some reference documents. A good place to start is the International Police Mountain Bike Association (IPMBA). It offers a free *Police Bike Unit Start-Up Information Packet*, as well as model policies and SOPs. Also useful would be a copy of IPMBA's *Complete Guide to Public Safety Cycling*. For a valuable resource, visit www.ipmba.org.

When planning for a new (or improved) bike unit, the following general items must be considered:

1. Mission;
2. Procurement of bikes;
3. Accessories, uniforms and equipment;
4. Personnel selection and training;
5. Bike maintenance and repair; and
6. Policies and standard operating procedures.

More specifically, you may ask yourself: How will the bikes be used? Will they be deployed full time, part time or in a combination? Will the bikes be used at night, necessitating quality head- and taillights? Will they be transported on patrol vehicles, requiring suitable bike racks? Will bike officers each be assigned a bike or share a pool bike with others? Will they have a proactive role, or will they routinely respond to calls for service? Like most new things, it may be daunting at first, but once you're up and rolling, the answers to each question will make sense.

Many departments start off small and gradually expand and modify the mission as bike officers come up with new applications and realize how comprehensively bicycles can be used. With training and experience, bike officers often surprise both peers and supervisors with their creativity in deploying bikes.

Personnel Are Key



Many administrators believe that police officers who are already bicycle enthusiasts will make the best bike officers. However, selecting only interested bike enthusiasts won't guarantee the success of a new unit. Potential bike officers should be aggressive, proactive and self-motivated, and they must get along well with the public. One bike officer will speak to more people in a single shift than any five officers assigned to cars. The ability to deal with all sorts of people is important.

Most good candidates can be taught to properly ride police bicycles, but the inner drive and motivation of a good, hard-working, community-oriented officer can't be taught. They either have it, or they don't.

Although it's important for bike officer candidates to be fit, they don't need to be in perfect condition. Their fitness can and will improve as they ride. Candidates without pre-existing problems with their backs, necks, knees or wrists are preferred, because these areas are particularly stressed while cycling. Many agencies require medical screenings to uncover any underlying health problems that may pose a risk to the officer.

Bring on the Bikes

Officers need high-quality mountain bikes with durable components to stand up to the rigors of the job. Bikes must handle all manner of obstacles, from stairs to slick rocks. Bikes are frequently dropped when pursuing and/or taking down suspects. Inexpensive, big-box store bikes or bikes from the impound lot rarely prove durable and safe enough to ride on duty. Bikes should be sourced from a reputable manufacturer, preferably one that offers a "police package" mountain bike. Trek, Volcanic, Cannondale, Fuji and Smith & Wesson are popular brands in police use, and other brands continue to emerge. The retail price of a good police-package bike averages about \$700, excluding a headlight system.

Police bikes differ from stock mountain bikes in several ways. For better performance, traction and safety, police bikes are equipped with smoother tires (street/combination) instead of traditional "knobbies." They're usually equipped with a rear rack and trunk bag for carrying paperwork and equipment. They should also have a kickstand, preferably a rear mount model. Pedal retention devices, such as strapless toe clips or Power Grips will keep the officer's feet on the pedals while ascending or descending obstacles.

Install a high-performance headlight system on every police bike used at night. These systems feature rechargeable batteries and exceptionally bright lamps capable of emitting several hundred lumens of light. Lamps may be LED, halogen or HID. The recommended minimum brightness level is 42 lumens measured 10 feet from the lamp. Of course, brighter is always better. Brands popular among police include NiteRider, Night Sun, Cygolite and CatEye. The security and durability of the light itself, as well as handlebar mount and battery connections, are critical. They must withstand being frequently dropped or jarred.

The decision to add colored lights and a siren to a police bike should be based on need. Most bike patrol officers don't need them. However, some jurisdictions require them if the bike is to be considered an emergency vehicle. Check the statutes to see if they are required in your state, especially for traffic enforcement. Several companies sell flashers and colored filters for existing headlamps. Others work independently of the headlamps. Popular brands include CycleSiren, Alerte Systems and NiteRider.

Bikes must be equipped to meet all state statutory equipment requirements. Although few states require battery-operated taillights, flashing LED taillights should be considered standard because they greatly enhance the safety of bike officers at night.

Police-package bikes can often be purchased through a reputable local bike dealer. Negotiating a service and repair contract with that dealer is a wise option, unless the bike unit will have a professionally trained bike mechanic. A contract that gives police bikes priority service is highly recommended. Most dealers enjoy working with the police and are usually eager to help.

Bikes and accessories are also sold by bike patrol supply companies, such as 4Bike-Police.com, Patrol Bike Systems and Police Bike Store. These may offer more choices than a local dealer, but it will still be necessary to arrange service through a local shop. Purchasing directly from the manufacturer may also be an option.

Departments with full-time bike patrol officers often assign officers exclusive use of their bike. They're assured a properly fit frame and that critical saddle adjustments will be left alone. Pool bikes can be acceptable for part-time bike officers. *Important:* Purchase a range of frame sizes to accommodate riders of different statures. It's unsafe to ride a bike that's too large and has less than two or three inches between the top tube and the crotch. Frames that are too small can also cause dangerous discomfort to the rider.

Uniforms?

When the first modern mountain bike patrol was established in 1987, police tried to modify their existing uniforms for bike patrol use. They were not successful. Because of their level of physical activity, bike officers generate more heat and perspiration. The ability to wick away excess moisture is an essential feature not usually found in standard uniforms. Bike patrol shirts, jackets, pants and shorts are typically made of wicking material and are cut to accommodate the cycling position and movements.

Special shirts that resemble traditional police shirts, complete with epaulets, pockets and even "military press" creases, are available. For a softer, non-traditional look, some departments select polo-style shirts, although these may lack breast pockets and require notebooks and pens to be carried in pants pockets. Many bike patrol shirts have extra long tails to help them stay tucked in while the officer is seated.

Shirts and jackets frequently feature a color, or a combination of colors, that will stand out in traffic. Common color combinations include yellow over navy and royal over dark blue, although manufacturers can supply almost any common uniform colors.

Regardless of the style, the bike officer must be readily and easily identified as a police officer. The chosen shirt and/or jacket should have department shoulder patches and a department badge. Embroidered or cloth badges are particularly useful for bike officers. Many departments have "POLICE" or "DEPUTY SHERIFF" emblazoned across the back. If the officer will be working

at night, reflective material on their uniform, at least in the back, is critical. Some may find it safer to wear a reflective vest while on bike patrol, depending on the area and type of patrol work being done.

Pants and shorts should be designed for bike patrol. These minimize seams (and pressure points) where the rider and the saddle meet. Most have pockets in the back, front and on the outside of the thigh.



Shorts are a necessity in hot weather to avoid heat-related illness. Cycling can cause the body to generate a lot of heat. Combined with hot weather, this can put the officer at risk of heat stroke or heat exhaustion. Although shorts may be a near iconic symbol of bike patrol officers, they're also potential lifesavers.

Pants are available in various materials and a range of prices. Pants with zip-off legs are an economical option for bike officers who patrol in varying weather conditions.

Consider weather conditions when selecting pants as well as jackets. High-end pants and jackets are usually water- and/or windproof, often made of Gore-Tex or a similar laminated material. They can be expensive, but they can also help keep a bike officer working in difficult weather. Less expensive pants and jackets are usually made of a non-laminated material that's treated with a fabric spray to make them water and wind resistant. These are suitable if bike officers rarely encounter harsh conditions.

Specialized bike patrol uniforms are available from Bratwear, Mocean, Olympic and United.

PPE

Personal protective equipment (PPE) for police cyclists includes equipment specific to both law enforcement and cycling. Use of a Consumer Products Safety Commission (CPSC)-approved bike helmet and protective eyewear should be mandatory for all bike officers. Cycling gloves are highly recommended, and officers should train in all their weapon systems while wearing their bike gloves, including firearms qualifications.

Regardless of the temperature, bike officers should wear body armor at all times. Their tendency to penetrate out- of-the-way areas, where criminals don't expect them, can put bike patrol officers at particular risk, and cover officers can be slow in locating them.

Synthetic webgear is the choice of virtually all bike officers. It's less expensive, more pliable and quieter than leather. Also, exposure to rain can cause leather dyes to bleed, a problem not found in synthetics. Officers who have leather gear for non-bike assignments and synthetic gear for bike patrol are advised to use the same style of holster with the same security level and release process regardless. Experience has shown that it can make a difference in a crisis.

Bike officers, particularly those who work full-time bike patrol, should consider wearing cycling shoes to protect their feet from repetitive-stress nerve damage, such as plantar fasciitis and Morton's neuroma. Several brands, including Patrol Cycle, are made in all-black for bike patrol officers.

Training

Surprisingly, police cycling may be one of the most demanding types of cycling. Sending an officer out on a bike without training is dangerous and negatively affects their effectiveness. Unlike recreational cyclists, who can ride on trails and away from traffic, police cyclists have to ride wherever they're needed. Whether patrolling or pursuing suspects or vehicles, officers must be able to safely surmount common obstacles, like curbs and stairs; have the skills to negotiate complicated traffic situations; be able to ride quickly, and be able to stop or turn instantly to avoid collisions; be able to ride very slowly and precisely through crowds of people, down sidewalks (where permitted) and between cars in parking lots. These are skills not normally practiced or perfected by recreational cyclists.

Comprehensive training programs, like IPMBA's certified Police Cyclist Course, provide the basic skills and information to enable bike officers to safely and effectively operate a bicycle on duty. A wide variety of advanced training opportunities, including bike maintenance and rapid response, are also available at IPMBA's annual conference.

Conclusion

Bike patrols have proved incredibly effective in fighting crime, building trust and enhancing communication within communities. Proper planning is essential to building an effective and affordable bike team. Purchasing equipment and uniforms often gets the most attention because it involves dollars and cents. Carefully selecting and properly training team personnel, however, will ultimately be the key to a bike patrol unit's success.

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