

Beyond Community Policing: The Crime-Fighting Effectiveness of the Police Cyclist

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The effectiveness of police officers on bicycles in community policing roles has long been established. One needs only to witness a crowd of children gathered around the “neighborhood bike officer” handing out trading cards or junior badges to understand the connection between citizens and police on bikes. Although the role of community officer is one of the most important and visible ones a bike officer plays, it is far from the only one. Beyond community policing there exist reactive policing and proactive policing, including surveillance, night operations, and traffic enforcement, all of which are being performed by bike cops across the country.

Reactive Policing

Reactive policing is a segment of police work that can and should be done by bike cops. Bike cops can perform the “everyday” functions of police work, such as investigating burglaries, handling trouble with subjects, and responding to ambulance requests. The only difference is that they arrive on the scene on bikes instead of in cars. If the geographical area is large and staffing issues prevent the officer from riding a bicycle for the entire shift, the officer can mount a bike rack on the patrol car and do a “park and ride.” According to a recent survey by the International Police Mountain Bike Association, 55% of responding agencies utilize this technique. Officers on bicycles are sometimes even faster responding to emergency calls than their motorized counterparts, due their ability to maneuver around traffic congestion and use short cuts only accessible to two-wheeled modes of transportation. In addition, many common calls are deemed low priority, so it does not really matter if the officer on a bike arrives in ten minutes rather than five.

Since the bicycle can access areas unreachable by motorized units, bike cops often find themselves patrolling these areas and finding easy success. Criminals sometimes choose to commit their deeds where police cruisers cannot follow; therefore, the police officer on a bicycle can engage in “sneaky” tactics (as described by those caught by police cyclists). Travel on the bike can be so quick and stealthy that criminals usually do not have a chance to conceal evidence or run away. If a criminal does run, the police cyclist is able to utilize the mechanical advantage of the bicycle, increasing the chances of apprehension. In the city of Ann Arbor, which has had over 70 bike-certified officers since 1993, there has been just one instance out of literally hundreds of foot-bicycle pursuits in which a suspect eluded arrest. This incident took place in the downtown area, where several driveways are lined with concrete half-walls. It was later discovered that the “suspect” was a Big Ten track and field hurdler!

Areas that are known to have a high degree of criminal activity can also be targeted using team tactics. For example, a park that houses reported alcohol and drug activity can be observed through binoculars from a point of advantage and concealment. Once several violations have been observed and documented, an entire team of police cyclists can converge on the area and make the necessary arrests. Word that this type of enforcement is being employed quickly spreads among the criminals and problems are soon displaced or dissolved.

Other locales might have specific, recurring crimes to address. In Ann Arbor, the residential area commonly inhabited by students is plagued with disorderly crimes and alcohol violations. During the months of September through December (football season), the agency deploys several “party patrol” officers to enforce a variety of violations, such as open intoxic in public, minor in possession, loud parties, and public urination. Some of these officers utilize the bicycle and literally write ticket after ticket. Upper classmen have learned that they cannot rely upon hiding their containers from a pair of approaching headlights in case it is a patrol car. The freshmen, however, have not yet experienced the stealthy bike officers and receive the majority of the tickets. This is affectionately referred to as AAPD’s version of “freshman orientation.”

Surveillance

Bike officers can also be employed for surveillance. Surveillance can be conducted in the midst of the criminal activity, as plain clothes officers can either mingle or observe from different vantage points. A different technique involves an “observation officer” positioned away from the contact officers. The observation officer watches a specific target or area, and when an arrestable offense occurs, calls it out to the waiting motorized contact units. The observation officer remains stationary and hidden, ready to call out the next violation. The “chase cars” take enforcement action away from the scene after the violator leaves the area. Activity within that area continues as usual. General surveillance can be conducted from vantage points above eye level, such as at the top of parking structures and public buildings.

Specific targets can be followed and observed undetected by a cop on a bike, even if the officer is wearing a police bicycle uniform. Police cyclists can also wear plain clothes and ride bicycles with no visible police markings. Bike cops soon learn to use parking structures, alleys, walls, fences, trees, dumpsters, shrubbery, landscaping, and buildings to conceal themselves from targeted persons.

Night Operations

Think bike patrols can operate only during daylight hours? Think again. Working at night poses different challenges to the bike officer, but it also offers additional advantages. A bike cop is even more “stealthy” under the cover of darkness. Even a patrol car approaching in stealth mode can be heard and sometimes seen. The police cyclist working at night can utilize shadows, parked cars, building corners, and many other objects to conceal his/her position or from which to approach scenes. It is not uncommon for bike cops to hide and observe, then “ride right into” crimes in progress and make arrests before the criminal even knows what is happening! This can be a disadvantage at times, when the officer’s presence in the middle of criminal activity comes as a surprise to the officer as well.

Despite the stealthy nature of the bike, the officer must take certain measures to avoid making noise, including the “click, click, click” made by the rear derailleur of a coasting bicycle. This problem can be alleviated by equipping the bike with a so-called “silent hub.” Tools bouncing against one another in the officer’s rack bag can give a position away, so care must be taken to wrap such articles. Bicycle maintenance is important for more reasons than good performance: an unmaintained bicycle makes unusual and unnecessary noises.

Bike cops are not the only ones who may give their positions away at night, and bike cops are in a situation to be aware of unusual sounds. Noise from criminals carries at night as well, and bike officers might hear breaking glass, gunshots, or cries for help that patrol car officers may not be able to hear. It is not uncommon for police cyclists to discover criminal activity in progress, after hearing noises and quietly following up. Police cyclists working in Dayton, Ohio, arrested two suspects armed with fully automatic weapons after they silently followed “break-in” noises and made a traffic stop on a vehicle leaving the scene of a home invasion.

Any bike officer involved in night operations must take extra safety precautions, such as riding on the sidewalk and using reflective materials. Patrolling on the sidewalk can help protect the officers from drunk drivers, who are more prevalent at night. It also enables them to hide in shadows and areas of building egress. Riding on the sidewalk also takes the curb out of the equation during the transition to other riding surfaces such as the grassy or dirt areas in parks, alleys or construction sites. If the officer does ride in the street at night, all precautions must be taken to make the officer as visible as possible. Reflective seams and lettering sewn into the back of the uniform, headlights and flashing LED taillights, and pedal reflectors are all important.

Traffic Enforcement

Traffic enforcement? How can an officer on a bicycle catch motor vehicles and enforce traffic law? It is neither as difficult or ridiculous as it seems. Obviously, agencies are not assigning bike cops to the interstate, but they are employing them in downtown settings where congestion is high and speeds are low. Officers can easily ride between lines of bumper-to-bumper traffic, looking down into the passenger compartment of the stopped vehicles as they slowly pass. Numerous drunk driving arrests and open intoxicant tickets can be tallied in areas where teens engage in the ever-popular hobby of “cruising.” As a bonus, these traffic stops more often than not lead to other charges such as DWLS, open warrants, and drugs.

Bicycle-mounted officers are also utilized in residential areas, where speeding and stop sign violations are the most common complaint of residents. The team approach is used for such types of enforcement. One officer is stationed in a “not-so-conspicuous” location with a hand-held, battery-operated laser or radar unit. This officer reports speeds and descriptions to his partner(s), who is stationed a short distance up the street, ready to hand-stop the vehicle or wait near the next stop sign to initiate contact.

The suggestion of using bike officers for traffic enforcement raises a series of important questions: How does a police cyclist actually stop the vehicle? What does the officer do for cover during the approach and duration of the contact? And what if the driver doesn’t stop in the first place, either intentionally or unintentionally?

The first consideration in initiating vehicle stops is how to capture the driver’s attention. Without the luxury of overheads and air horns or sirens, the bike officer requires an alternative signaling device. Physical contact with the vehicle is discouraged since the police cyclist is extremely vulnerable, and it places the officer open to claims of vehicle damage. Several light/siren units have been designed specifically for police on bikes, and a whistle works well in the absence of one of these.

Once the driver has pulled over, the officer should always be cognizant of available cover, since the engine block of a police car is no longer available. Care should be taken in placement of the bicycle, to avoid damage to the bike by the vehicle, and to allow for a rapid retreat to cover if necessary.

A passenger side approach is preferred to the driver side approach for several reasons. First, because the officer does not have the protection of a patrol car with emergency lights activated to offset from the target vehicle, approaching on the passenger side gives the officer a certain measure of protection. Second, the passenger side approach comes as a surprise to the occupants of a stopped car, and it is not uncommon for a police cyclist to stand on the passenger side for several seconds and even minutes before being noticed by the occupants. This time affords the officer an enormous advantage – that of being in a position to act rather than react, whether the choice is to retreat or engage.

Once the officer has made contact, the driver can be requested to perform certain actions to improve the officer's physical safety, and tactical advantage. The officer can request that the driver activate the hazard lights on for more rear visibility. At night, the officer can request the driver to turn on the dome light and leave it on throughout the entire stop, providing the officer with the tactical advantage of being in the dark and looking into a lighted interior. The officer might also want to consider taking the keys to the vehicle, or, at minimum, having the driver turn off the engine. These actions make it slightly more difficult for the driver to flee.

After the officer has obtained the necessary information, the area in which the warrant check will be made and where the ticket will be written must be selected. Ideally, some immediate environmental cover will exist, behind which the officer can perform these routine police functions. If not, and if no other officers are available to assist, the officer might choose a location away from the bicycle since this is where the occupants might expect him/her to be.

Initially, if the driver does not stop and intentionally flees, officer safety must be the main priority. The police cyclist should rely on patrol vehicles to become involved to complete the arrest using high-risk tactics. Felony fleeing charges have become common in cases of police cyclist-vehicle pursuits, as discovered by the survey previously cited.

Conclusion

While police bicycle officers continue to be an integral and essential part of the community policing initiative, many law enforcement agencies are beginning to explore ways to incorporate them into various types of operations. Forward-thinking agencies continue to discover new and creative uses for the police bicycle. One increasingly common use is patrolling mall parking lots during winter holidays. Agencies report significant effectiveness in apprehending those who snatch purses and shopping bags, finding stolen cars, and catching fleeing retail fraud suspects. Some agencies employ bicycles to enforce fishing and hunting laws, to manage crowds during organized protests, demonstrations, and acts of civil disobedience; and as part of executive protection details. This is just the beginning. Continued advancements in equipment, technology, and training will continue to expand the use of the bike as an effective policing tool.

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