

# *Palm Beach County, Florida*

## *Smart Policing Initiative*

*Increasing Police Legitimacy and Reducing  
Victimization in Immigrant Communities*

**Smart Policing Initiative: Program Profile**

*September 2012*

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## Program Overview

Recent increases in robbery in the city of Lake Worth, Florida have been concentrated in neighborhoods where many of the residents are migrant workers of Guatemalan (and Mayan) descent. The Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office (PBSO) and its research partner at Lynn University sought to address this robbery problem, as well as the challenges surrounding policing immigrant communities more generally, through their Smart Policing Initiative (SPI). The PBSO SPI included targeted efforts to increase police legitimacy, to improve residents' awareness of their victimization risk, and to empower residents to embrace crime prevention in their community.

The centerpiece of the Palm Beach County SPI involved the hiring of a Community Liaison to serve as a community advocate and as an intermediary between law enforcement and the immigrant community. In addition, a robbery detective was re-assigned and dedicated to investigate all robberies in the immigrant community, work closely with the Community Liaison, conduct proactive patrols throughout the area, and monitor known offenders and ex-offenders. The strategies that defined the PBSO's Smart Policing Initiative reflect core principles of the Community-Oriented Policing philosophy - data-driven analysis of the problem, community engagement, problem solving and partnerships.

Early results from the program evaluation suggest positive progress has been made, including improved relations between the police and the immigrant community and a reduction in robbery. The Palm Beach SPI project has been selected as a Top 25 semi-finalist for the IACP/Motorola Webber Seavey Award for Quality in Law Enforcement and is a second round finalist for the 2011 Herman Goldstein Award. The Palm Beach SPI has also been highlighted by the Vera Institute of Justice's Engaging Police in Immigrant Communities project, a US Department of Justice-funded program that seeks to identify promising practices in police/immigration relations.

# PALM BEACH, FLORIDA SMART POLICING INITIATIVE: INCREASING POLICE LEGITIMACY AND REDUCING VICTIMIZATION IN IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES

*MICHAEL D. WHITE, DEBRA AINBINDER, AND ROLONDO SILVA*

## I. THE PROBLEM

The city of Lake Worth is located in central Palm Beach County with a population of approximately 35,000 residents.<sup>1</sup> US Census data (2010) indicate that 40% of the city's residents are Hispanic or Latino. PBSO notes that the majority of these residents are of Guatemalan descent, and they estimate that there are an additional 10,000 undocumented immigrants in the Lake Worth area. Notably, the city of Lake Worth has experienced a steady increase in robberies since 2002. Further analysis shows that a significant number of the robberies occur in the neighborhoods which are home to many of the city's Guatemalan residents. Many of the victims in these robberies are day laborers who make easy targets for criminals because they tend to carry cash payments from their labor on their person, they solicit employment from potential, but unknown employers, and they loiter in public places at night, often engaging in public consumption of alcohol.

This immigrant population is also challenging for law enforcement because the population is both migrant and mobile. Many of the immigrants do not have a permanent residence, and they tend to move in and out of Palm Beach

County based on available employment. This mobility makes it very difficult for police to gather information on crime and to follow-up with victims. Second, communication with the residents in this community is complicated by language barriers, as well as high rates of illiteracy. Though many residents do speak and understand Spanish, it is not their native language. For example, there are 23 different dialects in the Mayan population and all are spoken in the Lake Worth area. Moreover, the Guatemalan neighborhoods are rich with customs and values that are unique to their culture.

Third, many of the residents in this community have had negative interactions with police in their native country, and these past experiences have colored their views of local police in Palm Beach County. Last, a significant portion of this population is in the country illegally, and fear of deportation leads many to avoid contact with police, even if they have been the victims of crime. As a result, police efforts to engage the immigrant community, to reduce their risk of victimization, and to enhance their views of police legitimacy are seriously challenged.

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<sup>1</sup> In October 2008, the city of Lake Worth Police Department merged with PBSO, and since that time, PBSO has provided all police service to the city.

## II. THE PALM BEACH, FL SMART POLICING INITIATIVE

The PBSO SPI sought to achieve three overall goals:

1. To cultivate trust and collaboration with the Guatemalan immigrant community and empower them to report crimes and take a proactive stance against victimization;
2. To educate immigrant residents about crime prevention and risky behaviors such as carrying cash, loitering, public alcohol consumption and soliciting employment in public, all of which increases their risk of victimization; and
3. To proactively investigate robberies and track robbery suspects in the community.

### The Community Liaison

PBSO hired the Community Liaison in April 2010. The Liaison, a Guatemalan-born naturalized citizen who speaks English, Spanish and the Mayan language, Kanjobal, serves as a community advocate and as an intermediary between law enforcement and the immigrant community. His central goal has been to build a bridge between PBSO and the migrant community by engaging residents and law enforcement in positive outreach events.<sup>2</sup> These community-building events include:

- A kick-off picnic in July 2010 that formally introduced the Liaison to the community

<sup>2</sup> For local news stories on the PBSO SPI and the Community Liaison, see: <http://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/palm-beach/fl-smart-policing-pbso-20110320,0,4148400.story>; and <http://www.palmbeachpost.com/news/lake-worth-liaison-builds-trust-between-city-immigrants-2231871.html>.

and initiated a dialogue over victimization, crime prevention and social service availability. More than 250 residents attended the picnic, which also included representatives from community-based organizations, the Palm Beach County Health Department, banks and the media.

- Two Guatemalan Consulate events in August 2010 and May 2011 which each drew more than 2,000 Guatemalan citizens. The events focused on providing information regarding at-risk behaviors, crime prevention, opening bank accounts and securing formal documentation. At the 2010 event, more than 1,600 individuals were able to obtain identification cards and passports (which facilitate opening a bank account).
- A Unity Soccer Cup Tournament in March 2011 planned and facilitated by the Community Liaison. Eight local teams competed against one another, including a team fielded by PBSO, and more than 800 people attended the event.<sup>3</sup> A second soccer tournament was held in September 2011.
- Quarterly meetings between the Liaison and clergy and business leaders, as well as regular spots on two local Spanish radio stations (one bi-weekly and one bi-monthly). The Community Liaison answers questions from callers and discusses topics such as how to report anonymous tips through Crime Stoppers, available resources

<sup>3</sup> For a local news story on the Unity Soccer Cup tournament, see: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UM1JpncjT\\_g&feature=player\\_embedded#!](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UM1JpncjT_g&feature=player_embedded#!)

in the community, immigration issues, and upcoming outreach events.

- Monthly Presentations to ESOL (English for Students of Other Languages) classes at the local high school that provide information on behaviors that increase risk of victimization. The PBSO SPI team has developed a structured curriculum and approximately 1,100 residents have attended these sessions.
- Engagement with the Sheriff’s office at both the line and leadership levels to raise awareness of the plight and needs of this community. This includes regular reporting to PBSO leadership, and collaboration with both robbery detectives and patrol officers.

The Community Liaison has been absolutely critical for overcoming fear and resistance among the residents of the Guatemalan immigrant community. The Liaison shares a common background with residents who live in the area, and he understands that they are Guatemalan, not Hispanic. This is a critical distinction that cannot be understated. His ability to connect with individuals on a personal and familiar level has laid an important foundation that, in the long term, will likely increase police legitimacy in the eyes of the residents and will help the department achieve its core objectives of community engagement and crime reduction.

### **The Dedicated Robbery Detective**

PBSO assigned a dedicated robbery detective to investigate all robberies in the immigrant community. The overall objective of assigning a dedicated robbery detective to the area is to

increase crime reporting and victim cooperation with police, and as a result, to improve the PBSO investigation of robberies in the migrant community. To achieve this objective, the detective works very closely with the Community Liaison to follow-up with crime victims, educate them regarding the investigation process, and encourage them to cooperate with the criminal justice system. The detective also conducts proactive patrols throughout the community to communicate with residents, identify at-risk behaviors, and gather intelligence on offenders. He also meets weekly with PBSO’s Strategic Intelligence Unit to identify and track individuals released from jail and state prison who return to the immigrant community. The detective makes contact with ex-offenders (“knock and talks”) to make sure they are complying with any court-ordered conditions and to refer them to any services they may need to facilitate their re-entry into the community.

The dedicated robbery detective provides stability on the sworn side of the partnership. The detective has become a recognizable face to migrant residents, and he is increasingly viewed as an active partner working with the Community Liaison. The detective’s proactive work in the community has served to reinforce the message being delivered by the Community Liaison. Just as important, the detective’s “knock and talks” send a clear deterrent message to potential offenders highlighting the consequences for problem behavior.

### **Results to Date**

The immigrant population also presents challenges for research and evaluation (e.g., mobility severely limits the potential for pre-

post surveys of specific individuals). The Palm Beach SPI evaluation plan centers on repeated surveys of immigrants over time, focusing on their perceptions of the police, as well as the prevalence of robberies in the immigrant community. Though results are preliminary and additional research would boost confidence in the findings, results suggest positive progress.

First, surveys of residents in the target area indicate that immigrants' attitudes toward the police have improved during the SPI, including higher levels of satisfaction, and greater levels of comfort speaking to police and reporting crimes (i.e., greater trust).

Second, crime data indicate a short-term spike in robberies during the initial phase of the project (April-September 2010), possibly resulting from increased reporting due to successful engagement of the residents. However, robberies in the immigrant community dropped notably during the next phase of the SPI project (October 2010-December 2011), from an average of 9.3 per month to 7.3 per month (a 22% decline). Moreover, during the first six months of 2012, the average monthly number of robberies has remained low (7.5 per month). Over that same time period, arrests for robberies have increased substantially.

### **III. CHALLENGES TO SUCCESSFULLY ENGAGING IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES**

The experiences in Palm Beach highlight a number of difficult challenges that law enforcement agencies must overcome if they are to be successful in their efforts to engage immigrant communities.

#### **Understand the Origins of Immigrants' Attitudes toward the Police**

It is easy for line officers to take offense at the response they sometimes receive during interactions with residents in immigrant communities. These responses may include fear, withdrawal, refusal to cooperate, resentment and even outright hostility. Officers should recognize that many immigrants have long and, in some cases, tragic and violent histories with police in their native countries that have colored their judgment of local law enforcement in the United States. This cultural baggage is not easily left behind, and it may represent a major challenge for outreach efforts. If a line officer is assigned to a closely knit immigrant community, he or she would be well-advised to acquaint themselves with the background and recent history of the residents' native country. This information could give the officer important insights regarding residents' views and attitudes, and it could give the officer some perspective on the cultural barriers that need to be overcome. The hiring of a Community Liaison with strong ties to the immigrant community can serve as an invaluable resource in these efforts, as highlighted by the experience in Palm Beach.

#### **Coordination with Federal and State Immigration Authorities**

The role of local police in immigration enforcement remains unclear and poses serious challenges for initiatives by police to positively engage immigrant communities.<sup>4</sup> The

<sup>4</sup> The U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments in the case involving Arizona's SB1070 on April 25, 2012. The ruling, announced on June 25, 2012, declared unconstitutional most of the Arizona law. However,



controversies surrounding this issue also highlight the importance of coordination between local law enforcement and federal (and state) agencies tasked with immigration enforcement. Federal immigration enforcement in a migrant community, while important and necessary, can significantly undermine relationship-building efforts by a local police department. It is important for local police to maintain an open dialogue with state and federal partners. The police manager can communicate the goals and objectives of local law enforcement to those partners, and can be kept apprised of upcoming immigration operations. If federal intervention is imminent, the police manager can develop a plan to insure minimal damage to their local community-building initiatives.

### **Understand the Importance of Building Legitimacy**

Research shows that Community-Oriented Policing strategies can change citizens' attitudes toward the police, and have the potential to reduce crime (Weisburd and Eck, 2004). Research also shows that officers generally have resisted efforts to implement Community-Oriented Policing. Community-Oriented Policing represents a substantial philosophical shift away from the much more popular and ingrained crime-fighting culture of police. Community-Oriented Policing also involves recognition that police cannot solve the crime problem by themselves, and that the community has an important role to play in

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the Court's ruling does permit local law enforcement officers to investigate immigration status if they have reasonable suspicion to believe that an individual is in the country illegally.

crime control and prevention. These are not small issues. As a result, officers need to see the big picture, and to keep in mind their overall mission. If line officers want to be successful in achieving their mission, they must first engage the immigrant community and establish themselves as a legitimate authority. The legitimacy-building process begins with treating people justly and building trust. In Palm Beach, the Community Liaison facilitated this process. Once trust has begun to take shape on a community-wide scale, immigrant residents will increasingly view the police as a legitimate, valuable resource. As Tyler (1990, 2003) suggests, increased legitimacy will then lead to enhanced cooperation with the police and greater compliance with the law. And these outcomes go to the very core of what police are seeking to accomplish.

**For more information on the Palm Beach, FL Smart Policing Initiative, see:**

<http://www.smartpolicinginitiative.com/SPIsites/palm-beach-florida>

### **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

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Administration from Lynn University in 2001. He holds two active law licenses and is a graduate of Harvard's Executive Education program for Senior Executives in State and Local Government. He has been involved in several significant projects working with immigrant communities including a collaborative initiative with the Haitian National Police in 2010, which earned him the distinguished Excellence in Law Enforcement Award by the Anti-Defamation League.

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