Changing Responses: Welcome to the Virtual Police Officer

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The Command College Futures Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue of relevance to law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future; rather, to project a variety of possible scenarios useful for strategic planning in anticipation of the emerging landscape facing policing organizations.

This journal article was created using the futures forecasting process of Command College and its outcomes. Defining the future differs from analyzing the past, because it has not yet happened. In this article, methodologies have been used to discern useful alternatives to enhance the success of planners and leaders in their response to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing it—creating, constraining and adapting to emerging trends and events in a way that optimizes the opportunities and minimizes the threats of relevance to the profession.

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Imagine a situation where operators are monitoring "Virtual Police Officer" cameras located within a local restaurant. The operator observes an armed robbery; seeing the incident unfold in real time, patrol officers are dispatched and are able to safely stage and plan their response. As the incident progresses, it unexpectedly turns into a hostage situation. Based on the information gathered from surveillance (which includes audio), the operator relays the intent of the suspects within the location to the officers staged outside. As additional units arrive, including SWAT officers, each of the supervisors and team leaders can view and hear everything within the restaurant by accessing the video link using their issued PDA's.

Based on knowing what the suspects look like and where they are located, SWAT initiates a successful rescue of employees through a rear door. Officers also hear the suspects discuss their plan to walk out of the restaurant pretending to be hostages in an attempt flee the scene. After hearing the plot, officers are prepared for the escape plan, and apprehend the suspects without incident. If this sounds improbable, it isn't.

This scenario was based on an actual incident in a Jack in the Box restaurant in South Central Los Angeles as reported by Dianne Ritchey in the October 2011 issue of Security Magazine (Ritchey, 2011). In that particular incident, the security manager for The Virtual Guard surveillance system (a privately-contracted video monitoring and response system) was alerted to an armed robbery at a Jack in the Box. Just as in our scenario, patrol officers and SWAT responded. In the real world, though, the police did not have direct access to the camera system monitoring the business. Access was, though, granted to the police by Westec, the security company contracted by the restaurant to perform this service. The information regarding the location, description and actions of the

suspects were relayed to all responding officers, which eventually led to the successful apprehension of the suspects and release of the hostages. Imagine if law enforcement were to possess these tools now. The impact on crime could be substantial, especially in incidents where the innocent are in danger, and where crime rates are persistently high. Developing a "virtual police officer" to monitor and assist in the response of law enforcement to crime can be a significant boon to reduce the frequency of crime, and also to better protect our public. Interestingly, the future is already here.

What is a Virtual Police Officer?

The Virtual Police Officer can be a surveillance system operated and maintained by the police department. In fact, one vendor sells a complete system now to private organizations; there is little reason not to consider ways to co-opt its capacities for the public good. Through whatever means most appropriate for a community, the virtual police system would have a number of benefits.

A complete system would require cameras, software and a specific location. All of the cameras could be viewed from a stationary monitor or by a handheld device, such as a smart phone or iPad. The operator who monitors the surveillance cameras would have the ability to give commands to subjects they are monitoring. For instance, if a subject is walking through a restricted area after hours, in this example a park with a high rate of crime, the camera will alert the operator that movement has been detected in the restricted area. Once the operator verifies a subject is within the restricted area, they can give commands for the subject to vacate the premises. If the subject refuses to leave, a snapshot of the violator can be taken and sent directly to the patrol officer's computer in their

vehicle. Additional enhancements to the system can include facial recognition software, license place reading software and a "dual communication" feature, which would allow a subject to push a button and automatically be connected to the operator monitoring the cameras.

Virtual Police (virtualpolice247.com) markets a system to monitor locales using a comprehensive video and audio monitoring installation. They do not yet have contracts with policing agencies, but have more than 300,000 installations worldwide. According to Lance Rankin, a representative of Virtual Police, the initial cost of the program would depend on the location and number of cameras that are required. A single fishbowl camera, for instance, can cover a location approximately 3200 square feet; a location that requires 8 cameras could cost as much as $20,000. As much as law enforcement might not consider being at the forefront of technological change, private security is already capturing a sizeable market share. A recent LA Times article reported the US. Private security industry is expected to grow 6.3% a year to $19.9 billion by 2016, according to a study by security research group Freedonia Group Inc. By contrast, the article also points out that nationally, employment in local government jobs, which includes police, has dropped 4% since 2009 (Semuels February 20, 2013).

How will it benefit?

In a survey documented in *A Booming Business: Private Security and Small Arms*, private security guards have outnumbered police officers consistently since the 1980's. The survey shows that the 2 million contract security officers and guards estimated to work for U.S. corporations dwarf the nearly 700,000 sworn law enforcement officers in the United States (Florquin, 2011). Private security firms continue to grow. In some cases they

have expanded their services to include conducting complex criminal investigations and performing patrol services in areas that had been, predominantly patrolled by law enforcement agencies. These companies are marketing themselves to provide services that local agencies cannot, or will not provide.

For example, Securitas AB was predominantly a European based company until they acquired Pinkerton's in 1999, thus becoming the largest security firm in the world. The Pinkerton firm had a rich and distinguished history dating back to 1850's in Chicago, when Allan Pinkerton, the "original private eye," founded Pinkerton's National Detective Agency. To date, Securitas has 650 local branch managers and more than 90,000 security officers working in the United States alone. A service similar to the Virtual Officer, the Pinkerton Vigilance is a cloud based 24/7 incident and trend data monitoring system that gathers data and evaluates threats. When any potential threat is reported, the operator notifies the client, and also deploys a field unit if necessary. Of course, if there is a need for prosecution, jailing offenders or to complete time-consuming and costly work, they can always call the local police.

Law enforcement does not have to incorporate the same level of technological advancements used in private companies. As means emerge that can create a higher level of service, in a cost efficient manner, it is a goal worth striving for. If not, what might be the alternative?

Welcome to Your Private Security Force.

On your next venture out of the house, look around to see how many businesses are employing private security officers. In many major cities today, housing complexes,

neighborhood associations, university campuses and shopping areas rely heavily on various forms of private policing. In a December 15, 2011 article from the National Center for Policy Analysis, *Private Policing Options for the Poor,* private security officers outnumber police officers nearly 3 to 1 (Jaeger and Stringham, 2011). The authors attribute the growth of security officers to the failure of government to protect the community from criminal activity, especially in low-income areas. Data from the U.S. Department of Justice reflect the rate of crimes against households in poverty is three times greater than against higher income families. Sadly, these are the same areas experiencing cutbacks in government services. With crime rising and budgets shrinking, some cities have opted to contract to private security. They have done so for two main reasons: they provide additional personnel, and do so at a lower rate.

In January 2012, the town of Foley, Minnesota was slated to be the first town in Minnesota to replace its entire police force with private guards (Petrie and Marohn, 2011). The decision to end their contract with the county Sheriff's department for law enforcement was based on budget cuts and uncertain future funding for the town. In a cost saving measure, they found they could end the contract with the Sheriff's department of $24,694 per month and replace them with the General Security Services Corp (GSSC) who contracted to provide more officers in the field than the Sheriff had deployed 24 hours a day, at $16,000 a month (Petrie and Marohn, 2011). Minnesota Attorney General Lori Swanson advised the City on October 25, 2011 their actions could expose the community to potential lawsuits for false imprisonment and other serious issues. Due to that stance, and concerns raised by Neil Melton, executive director of the Peace Officer Standards Training Board, the City rescinded their actions and elected to create their own police department.

The sentiments toward public policing have inevitably changed; communities want cost effective policing. The longer we wait to move to the forefront of technology, the more likely it is that another "Foley" will break through the barriers and create a public-private model others may copy.

The Virtual Police Officer Program – It May Be Our Future

Being able to safely and effectively respond to incidents of crime and disorder is perhaps the most critical duty performed by patrol officers. Knowing there are technologies that could make this job easier, and not pursuing their adoption, is below the standard of effort our communities expect from us. Patrol operations, specifically as they relate to responding to crimes in progress and monitoring areas with high crime rates, would benefit from the virtual police officer program as it reduces the allocation of staffing officers in specific areas or can eliminate a response by patrol all together. It is important to understand the virtual officer is not intended to replace existing officers, but will allow officers to concentrate on areas where the crime in general is higher.

How do you decide where to place the virtual officer surveillance system? The most obvious locations will yield the best results. Locations with the highest crime rates or highest rates for calls for service are areas that should be explored first. An area that has repeat calls for false alarm activations, for instance can be quickly evaluated to see if it is valid. After monitoring the location with the virtual officer system, it can be determined whether or not an officer needs to respond.

In a case where the alarm is valid, the identity of the intruder can be captured using the surveillance equipment and a description broadcast to responding officers. As a system owned and operated by the local police department, it can be used to validate a citation for

excessive responses on false alarms. In other areas the system can be used as part of the abatement process for locations identified as a criminal nuisance. In this example, an apartment complex has been identified as a criminal nuisance. The Virtual Police Officer system can be installed, and then used as a measure to prevent recurrent criminal activity from occurring at the owner's expense. Instead of requiring the location to maintain security personnel on the premises, the Virtual Police Officer system would be installed giving the police department access to view, monitor and respond as needed. As envisioned, once a significant period of time has elapsed and a marked reduction in criminal activity has been documented, the owner may have the ability to discontinue use of the virtual officer program, or continue to pay for the service to continue.

Future Results of Implementing The Virtual Police Officer

There are multiple sources which offer the Virtual Police or Virtual Guard type surveillance systems. Interface, the company that purchased Westec in March 2012, is another example. Interface uses the Virtual Guard system, they cater to a wide range of businesses from retail, dining to lodging. Zales Jewelry, an Interface client, reported a 40% reduction in shrinkage, the loss in inventory due to shoplifting, employee theft and fraud. Even with the system in place, crime did not disappear; however, the increase in the number of prosecutions, by use of higher quality videos for identification purposes has been noticed. Additionally, the use of the monitoring system allows their officers the ability to respond quickly. According to Westec, in 12 years of operation, they were able to resolve nearly 98 percent of all alarms without dispatching police. This was accomplished by visually inspecting the property using the Virtual Guard system.

The use of privately owned monitoring systems have long been a feature of crime prevention in shopping malls, and convenience stores; however, surveillance systems monitored by law enforcement are relatively new to the U.S. According to a nationwide survey of law enforcement agencies conducted by RAND in 2000, only 3 percent of local departments and 7 percent of state police reported extensive use of "fixed-site" video surveillance cameras (Schwabe et al. 2001). The California Research Bureau published a study in 2008 titled *Measuring the Effects of Video Surveillance on Crime in Los Angeles*. The report focused on two significant locations, Hollywood Boulevard's "Walk of Fame" and Jordan Down's public housing development. Although the report indicated areas where alcohol, such the bar district covered in the Hollywood area, and heavy gang activity, such as Jordan Down's, crime did not have a statistical decrease (Cameron et al. 2008). The surveillance equipment played a role in the prosecution of those same crimes. Data related to the use of surveillance equipment and prosecutions, however, has not been collected. The preponderance of evidence indicates, though, the cost of these systems is well worth the price.

The potential to reduce costs after initial implementation of these programs makes them an effective use of funds. Based on current trends, advancements in computer technology continue to grow at unprecedented rates. What was once thought of as impossible has now become a reality. Virtual officer surveillance programs offer a wide range of possibilities both for law enforcement and the community. The idea of communicating with a virtual officer is no longer a theory, but a new and exciting means to accomplish the same goals with new, innovative means.

Conclusion

Computers and other devices have been implemented as a way of increasing efficiency within field operation divisions. Implementing a virtual police officer program allows the same service to be delivered, but with more frequency and less staffing in patrol. Staff members can monitor locations, broadcast suspect descriptions and provide details on incidents as they occur without ever leaving a monitoring room. The virtual officer program may prove to not only increase efficiency, but also save agencies and taxpayers alike by reducing the number of injuries sustained by officers responding to calls for service and increasing community safety.

Developing and implementing alternative means to patrolling specific locations by use of the virtual police officer, law enforcement can continue to frame its response to the needs of the community and create a safer environment for society as a whole. Officers can rely on information being given to them coming directly from monitoring rooms that are staffed with law enforcement personnel. The use of a third party, or reporting parties can be used to verify information that is already obtained from the virtual police officer program.

Although there are many opportunities to be gained from the virtual police officer program, the implementation of it as a sole means to remedy staffing issues is not recommended. In its initial phase, it is designed to be a companion tool to traditional police responses. It is possible the virtual police officer will significantly impact how law enforcement interacts with the public and provides an innovative, new method to conduct police work.

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