Roanoke Co. police Crunching numbers

Zach Crizer|zach.crizer@roanoke.com|981-3234

Apr 7, 2013
https://www.roanoke.com/news/local/roanoke_county/roanoke-co-police-crunching-numbers/article_a35f875f-bbf1-52c2-9a19-1e74973a978b.html
April 2019.

MATT GENTRY | The Roanoke Times;Brittani Money, a crime analyst with the Roanoke County Police Department, and Lt. Chuck Mason (right), assistant chief of operations, discuss ways the data gathered by patrol officers can be used to help prevent crime.

MATT GENTRY | The Roanoke Times;Brittani Money, the Roanoke County Police Department's crime analyst, explains how the new system keeps track of problem areas.

Each time a Roanoke County police officer activates his blue lights to conduct a basic traffic stop, Police Chief Howard Hall counts five ways the stop aids law enforcement.

It can change the driver's tendency to commit whatever violation spurred the officer to make the stop, of course, but it also could snare someone wanted for more serious

crimes. Or, in a third benefit, the officer may gain information about a person that could later prove helpful in locating them in the future.

“Apparently,” he said, “people who tend to commit crime don’t always drive the best.”

Still, as Hall — who has been in command of the Roanoke County Police Department since August — assesses the value of a basic traffic stop, he’s just as interested in the other ways it can inform the department’s efforts to keep the general public safe.

Hall is implementing a data-driven approach to police work that will guide the department’s attempts to deploy resources efficiently. Where the information collected by the officer at a car’s window adds to the department’s data collection, the stop also has outward implications that can be used in deterring criminal behavior.

The fourth possible benefit of a traffic stop, he said, is the effect it can have on anyone who sees the blue lights at that moment. Passing drivers are less likely to run red lights or speed when someone has just been pulled over.

And the effect can linger, Hall said, altering criminal patterns. This is the value of traffic stops that, at the most basic level, Hall’s data-driven approach hopes to capitalize on.

“If I’m in an area looking to break into cars, and I see police making traffic stops,” he said, “I’m not so comfortable.”

Over the past few months, the department has been laying the groundwork to use the Data-Driven Approaches to Crime and Traffic Safety, a model used by departments across the country that combines traffic data with criminal data to determine when and where officers are needed.

He said the combination of traffic and crime information allows specially trained analysts to offer predictions on where incidents may occur in the future. Based on the data, officers can attempt to prevent crime instead of simply reacting.

“As opposed to it just being driven by 911 calls, it’s using our information to figure out where we can deploy our resources,” Hall said.

Hall, who used the model in his previous job in Maryland, took many of his officers to conferences on the program, including one in Roanoke where he also invited officers from Roanoke, Salem, Vinton and the Virginia State Police. He said he hopes the departments increase data-sharing going forward to create a more cohesive regional approach. Hall pointed out the Roanoke Police Department has already been using crime analysts.

In January, he hired Brittani Money as the county department’s first crime analyst.

Money, who picked up an interest in quantitative crime analysis while studying for her master’s degree at Radford University, is tasked with spotting trends and patterns.

“I look at a lot of hot spots,” she said. “And for that I go back at least three years.”

Using data generated by everyday police activity, Money compiles maps and other presentations that show department leaders where a specific problem, such as burglaries, may be more prevalent.

The officers then develop a strategy to cut down on the crimes in the target area. Hall said the department could encourage a group of residents to start a neighborhood watch group, in some cases, or it could ramp up visible police activity — such as traffic stops — in a target area to make criminal behavior less likely.

Over the next few months, as the approach is fully implemented, officers will begin receiving more information derived from Money’s analysis. The analyst reports directly to assistant chief Chuck Mason, who commands the operations division.

“Some of the maps she’s produced have been shown in staff meetings,” Mason said. “You kind of get the ‘Oh, wow’ reactions on where things are happening.”

He said officers have always developed ideas of what neighborhoods are struggling with, but objective analysis provides more straightforward answers.

Money said the new, more precise maps she is creating are a significant step forward from the pin maps of the past.

“I think it’s great we’re using technology to better the department,” she said.

She has participated in recent training activities with the officers and spoken with many of them about the potential uses of the data, trying to give them an idea of what to expect. As the system begins to inform the department’s strategies of how many officers work at a given time and place, Hall said the data will also be used to assess success.

“Moving forward, it will be easier to visualize and track what’s going on, even the impact of their work,” he said.

And the impact, he said, should be enough for officers to get behind the data-driven approach.

“That’s why most of us took this job in the first place,” Hall said, “To keep this community safe.”