

Intelligence-Led Policing (US)

Policing

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Beyond the Fusion Center – Intelligence-Led Policing’s Central, Strategic Role

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Becoming an Intelligence-Led Policing organization, or ILP, is a complicated and arduous task, yet many police executives still believe just building a Fusion Center makes them “intelligence-led.” In fact, that’s just not enough!

Becoming an intelligence-led organization involves change from the very top to the very bottom of the law enforcement organization. A combination of threat assessment, information collection, and analysis – consistently applied to command level decision-making – is the true formula for success.

Throughout my 25-year career as a law enforcement professional and now working internationally with law enforcement agencies on their intelligence management initiatives, I have challenged police executives to understand the key elements of ILP and to employ this approach systematically.

Intelligence-Led Policing Origins

The ILP strategy was first developed in the United Kingdom and then flourished in Australia, where it has been responsible for solving significant criminal problems. Temple University Professor Dr. Jerry Radcliffe, a former UK police officer, is largely responsible for bringing the concept to the U.S.

ILP specifies that all police agencies should have some intelligence apparatus – a centralized location where they collect information about the criminal elements in their particular jurisdictions and the problems facing citizens; where they analyze that information; and where they then identify the biggest threats to their environments.

Based on such analysis and threat assessment, commanding officers are then expected to devise a strategy to combat these problems. Leveraging the analytical work is paramount, because the decision-making that takes place is backed up by actionable data instead of being based on incidental hearsay or news headlines.

ILP also insists that the intelligence unit remain separate from other police units. Since 9/11, many police agencies in the U.S. dedicate a substantial amount of their resources to counterterrorism initiatives. Unfortunately, this sizable investment comes at the expense of the specialized units needed to determine other overt threats to their law enforcement environments (i.e. gangs, organized crime, drug trafficking).

Today, as I travel around North America, I still find police agencies collecting volumes of information and – shockingly – not conducting the required analysis to incorporate this information into their strategic response. Even those agencies that are conducting some form of analysis are not developing “Strategic Plans” necessary to allocate scarce resources, or physically position resources, as required to meet the needs of their communities.

One could argue that in such places as the UK and Australia, ILP has succeeded because those countries possess large, regional police agencies. In such locales, analysts push out analysis and threat assessments to commanders, who then render decisions based on that data. One national police agency has the resources, and the centralized command, to allocate those resources in a much more efficient way than agencies in our fragmented multi-layered law enforcement environment.

Part of the challenge in U.S. law enforcement can be attributed to the de-centralized nature of our police infrastructure. In New Jersey alone, there are roughly 650 police departments. That means there are 650 chiefs, 650 strategies, and 650 command decisions being made. And of those 650 agencies, I would be shocked to learn if there are more than a dozen with formal intelligence units or an intelligence component.

Several police jurisdictions I work with believe they are facing significant street gang problems or are confronted with acute gun-related violence. In one case, significant resources have been dedicated to tracking gun purchases, targeting resources on gun seizures and interdicting gun violence. But I question if a true ILP type of analysis has ever been performed in those jurisdictions to confirm that these activities are in fact the most prevalent or most dangerous.

Even more so than our de-centralized nature, however, is the fact that we have the tendency for “knee-jerk” reactions to anecdotal reports or to the latest news headlines. From my perspective, law enforcement agencies are, by nature, reactive. I have noticed that even those agencies that have traditionally conducted proactive intelligence collection and investigation have become more reactive and less proactive since 9/11.

ILP is proactive. It’s about identifying and understanding the threat, developing the necessary investigative units and strategies, and positioning resources to eradicate the threats before crime materializes. I still see the prevailing law enforcement approach in this country too often depends on running from “fire to fire” and never really understanding, attacking, or eliminating the root cause of the problem.

ILP Building Blocks

While the cultural change that we referenced earlier takes time, here are three recommendations – based on ILP’s proven success – that law enforcement agencies can take today to more successfully tackle the strategic law enforcement challenges they face over the long term:

1. Police agencies across the country need to re-establish traditional, classic intelligence operations in their organizations, whereby intelligence officers are collecting intelligence and feeding that data to analysts. Such operations cannot be buried or hidden in Fusion Centers or in counterterrorism initiatives – as important as those institutions are. There should be intelligence officers dedicated to collecting intelligence on traditional organized crime, street gangs, Asian organized crime, and Russian organized crime, as well as terrorist-related activities.
2. Law enforcement organizations need to hire properly trained analysts and permit them to conduct premonitory and threat assessments. Their analysis should be based on surveys, investigations, informants, and any other pertinent information gathered from the criminal environments.
3. Command staff should make informed decisions based on analysis and assessment, not on what the news media makes the priority or the latest anecdotal horror story coming from a politician’s campaign literature.

Technology also plays a pivotal role – giving police agencies the tools, software and connectivity needed to execute these recommendations. Because of our multi-jurisdictional landscape, technology can help unify disparate intelligence into one seamless information system, accessible by all police agencies.

The idea is to develop an intelligence management system where all jurisdictions within a state or region contribute information, where information-sharing takes place, and where educated, trained analysts at the appropriate level make assessments. The strategic recommendations resulting from this analysis can show that one jurisdiction faces a drug problem, while a nearby one instead needs to focus on stolen property as its key issue.

For most law enforcement agencies, just starting with the creation of a centralized intelligence repository will be a step in the right direction toward overcoming traditional barriers faced in our multi-level law enforcement environment. It is a significant step that law enforcement agencies can employ today to begin embracing the concepts of, and reaping the benefits of, the proven ILP approach.

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