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Using Data to Improve Public Safety with Kris Henning

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Using Data to Improve Public Safety with Kris Henning

Welcome to PDX PLORES, a Portland state research podcast, featuring scholarship innovations and discoveries, pushing the boundaries of knowledge practice and what is possible for the benefit of our communities and the world.

My name is Kris Henning. I am a professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Portland State University. I study crime and the efforts of governmental agencies to try to manage public safety. For most people, crime and public safety are pretty important topics. They influence where people choose to live, where they choose to shop, recreate, and hang out.

It influences who they hang out with what they do and even who they vote for. We know that public safety is a central concern to most people who live in this country. If not all countries. And what I try to do is I try to work with agencies through my research and service to help them do a better job of monitoring and assessing how people feel about safety and crime monitoring and looking at trends in terms of crime, and then help those agencies try to develop better policies and practices for dealing with those things.

Most of the research that I do is have a very applied nature. While a lot of it does involve analyzing data. There's a high level of interchange between the agency and the university partners that I work with. What we typically do is identify an issue or a concern to the agency that I'm working with. And we try to collect data on that sometimes that involves doing community surveys. So we might send out 5,000 surveys to a random sample of people in a community. Ask them to fill out the survey and the questions are things like; how safe do you feel? What are your public safety concerns? And also, how do you feel about the agencies involved, for example, the police department and their efforts to manage public safety. We use data sources like that, but we also in our field have access to pretty sizeable databases on crimes, calls for service to the police. If I work with the department of corrections, I have access to data on all the inmates or adults in custody at any one given time and whether or not they recidivate. So usually we have access to large datasets and I work with agencies to analyze those data sets, to identify problems, areas of concern, and opportunities for them.

One of the projects that I currently have with the Portland police bureau is a federally sponsored project. And what we are doing is we're working with crime victims who have reported a crime through the online reporting system that the

Portland police bureau has. Many people don't fully realize that Portland has on a per capita basis per thousand residents, a much lower number of officers than cities typically of our size. The number of officers has been declining over the last decade. One of the ways that the police agency has handled that like many other places agencies around the country is to offer online reporting to crime victims. In Portland today, about half of all property crimes are reported directly through the online portal, as opposed to contacting 9-1-1, and having an officer dispatch. The challenge that we have is that the research that we've done and other people have done has suggested that people reporting through the online system are not very happy about that. It's a pretty impersonal experience. The only thing that they typically get is a police report number that they can use for insurance purposes. And the number one complaint that we see among the folks that are doing that. Is that a lack of follow-up that they hear nothing about their case, about what happened with the suspect involved. So people are generally quite dissatisfied. In fact, at this point, it's only about 15% of the people that we've surveyed say they're satisfied, very satisfied with that reporting experience.

That's a problem for a couple of reasons. First, if victims are not happy with the experience of reporting of crime yhey're probably less likely to report the next time something happens that leads to problems because agencies, police agencies, for example, unless they have a full accounting of crime and know where it's happened, they're not as able to effectively respond to that. So under reporting of crime is a serious issue.

It's also of concern in the sense that if people don't feel like the agencies involved. Are doing a good job are trustworthy. That also has problems in terms of public safety. Because part of the reason that we all have any of the law follow the law follow directives by the place is because we have trust and confidence in their ability to manage public safety. When victims don't report crimes and are dissatisfied, it took serious concern to our community.

For this project, what we are doing is we have a certain number of neighborhoods in Portland that are receiving an active intervention. And then we have some comparison neighborhoods that are not. The comparison neighborhoods are getting whatever typically happens in terms of the online reporting. They file an online to report and probably get nothing other than an email with the report. We're doing with the treatment neighborhoods is having an officer contact those victims about a week after they filed their online report to check in with them. So if they get ahold of the victim by a phone, they'll express concern, offer to answer questions that they have about their case.

If there has been any follow-up and then the officers have been instructed to pivot, to talking about crime prevention. The fact of the matter is most property crimes are not going to be solved by arresting the suspect involved. It's a very low likelihood that you're going to arrest a burglar or somebody who breaks into cars. Nationally the clearance rate for car prowls is about 5%. So the best thing that we can do to deal with those offenses is try and prevent them from the forefront. So the officer's transitioned into talking to the victims about ways they can protect their vehicle, their property, their home, and send them crime prevention information.

So that's the project that we're working on. We've had about 1,500 police contacts so far where police have made outreach either by phone or email. What we're finding is that the victims involved are significantly more likely to be satisfied, to very satisfied with the police response. It goes from about 15% base rate satisfaction to about 45% with this one single follow-up contact.

That's a project that we're doing currently it's of importance at a national level. We've done some recent. On online crime reporting and about 40 to 50% of all larger police agencies across the country now use online reporting. And we really know very little, if anything, about the experience of people using those systems.

My name is Kris Henning and my research focuses on helping criminal justice agencies better respond to threats, to public safety.