NEIGHBORHOOD POLICE NEWSLETTERS: EXPERIMENTS IN NEWARK AND HOUSTON

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

by
Antony M. Pate, Paul J. Lavrakas, Mary Ann Wycoff,
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with the assistance of
Sampson Annan
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Final Draft Report
to the
National Institute of Justice
The Honorable James K. Stewart, Director
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POLICE
FOUNDATION

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This report summarizes the results of evaluations of two experiments in which neighborhood police newsletters were mailed to households in two areas, one in Newark and one in Houston. The newsletters, published by the respective police departments, contained crime prevention advice, information about successful attempts to prevent or solve crimes and--in half the cases--local recorded crime statistics. The evaluation of these efforts consisted of controlled experiments conducted by the respective police departments and evaluated by the Police Foundation with funds provided by the National Institute of Justice.

Findings in Brief

Readership of the newsletters appeared to be relatively low. Only 53 to 63 percent of the persons interviewed recalled seeing the newsletter when shown an actual copy. The average number of issues reportedly examined ranged from one to two, although five and six issues were mailed in Houston and Newark respectively. The highest levels of reported readership were among those persons with the greatest amount of formal education.

Few measures of effect proved to be statistically significant. Such meagre results pose a serious question about whether newsletters are an effective method of providing information to households whose members have less than high school educations.

Media and Crime Prevention

There is increasing agreement among many criminal justice scholars and practitioners that effective crime prevention and fear reduction are primarily the result of citizens working together with local law enforcement agencies to make their own homes and neighborhoods safe (Lavrakas and Herz, 1982; Rosenbaum, 1982; Waller, 1979; Yin, 1979). Yet a decade of evaluation of crime prevention and fear reduction efforts has shown that it is no easy task to get citizens to take (and maintain) anti-crime efforts (Bickman and Lavrakas, 1976; Girard et al., 1976; Heller et al., 1975; Yin et al., 1977).

Although some increases in crime-prevention behaviors have been achieved by increasing social communication about crime (Lavrakas, Herz and Salem, 1981), mass media campaigns have been largely unsuccessful. The recent "Take a Bite out of Crime" campaign, for example, found that only 13 percent of those interviewed indicated any attitude change and only four percent indicated a change in behavior (Mendelsohn et al., 1981). More generally, communication media have demonstrated little effect on the fear of crime but have shown the ability to influence general knowledge about the crime problem.

It would be possible to conclude from these results that media campaigns cannot influence crime-prevention behaviors and, therefore, to rely solely upon community-based prevention efforts. Such a conclusion

would, however, fail to tap the potentially larger audiences that could be reached by media as opposed to those affected by local social networks. The failure to utilize the media would be particularly unfortunate in neighborhoods which, although they may have a serious crime problem, often have poorly developed community networks, and thus might be mobilized only through media campaigns.

Lavrakas et al. (1983) have suggested that one means of achieving the desired positive effects would be the provision of local crime data to neighborhood residents, allowing them to adjust their behaviors in accordance with the local crime conditions. If the recorded crime data suggested increases or decreases in crime, or levels greater or lower than those anticipated, the provision of such information might alter citizen fear or crime prevention behavior. If, on the other hand, such data suggested no changes in crime or indicated levels no different from those expected, the provision of such data might have no impact.

The provision of local crime data is controversial because of the ambiguous nature of its contents and its effects. As Lavrakas et al. (1983) have noted, there are many reasons why crime information seldom has been released by public officials. First, "fighting crime" traditionally has been viewed as the exclusive province of the police, and thus, it is argued, only the police need detailed information about local crime problems. Second, crime information has been restricted in order to protect the privacy of victims and safeguard on-going investigations. Probably the overriding reason that the release of such information has been so restricted concerns local politics and untested assumptions about citizens'

reactions to such information. Many elected officials appear quite sensitive about information they assume will create a public outrage. Other officials share a genuine, yet unsubstantiated, concern that releasing detailed information about crime to citizens will lead to excessive fear of crime.

One study of neighborhood police newsletters in Evanston, Illinois (Lavrakas et al., 1983) suggests that the provision of crime data--accompanied by other local crime-related information--can produce positive effects without attendant negative consequences. In that study, newsletters were distributed which contained crime prevention advice, stories of successful efforts to prevent or solve crimes and, in some cases, information about crimes that had been recorded in the vicinity. An evaluation of the effects of these newsletters suggested that recipients of the newsletters--and especially those who received crime statistics--were more likely to:

- perceive crime problems in their area to be serious;
- attribute responsibility for preventing crime to citizens rather than to the police;
- install household crime prevention devices; but
- were <u>not</u> more likely to be fearful of crime.

The findings from the Evanston study, although suggestive, were based on a non-experimental research design--that is, households were not assigned at random to receive the newsleters with or without statistics, or to receive no newsletter at all. This means that other factors besides the

newsletter may have produced the results. Furthermore, Evanston is hardly representative of most of this country--the overall crime problem there is not great, the great majority of crimes are directed against property, and almost 30 percent of the city's residents have bachelors or masters degrees.

The importance of the possible impact of neighborhood police newsletters led to these experimental tests of the effects of distributing such newsletters both with and without crime statistics.

The Newark and Houston Experiments

In a competitive solicitation, N.I.J requested proposals for field experiments to test strategies for reducing fear of crime. The Police Foundation won the competition and was asked to conduct the project on an accelerated timetable. Newark was selected as the "snow belt" test site, and Houston was selected as the "sun belt" test site. Newark is an old city, with high population density, declining population and a deteriorating revenue base; Houston is a new city, with low population density, rapid population growth and an expanding economy. In each city a Fear Reduction Task Force was created to consider possible strategies, select those that were most appropriate for the local conditions and plan and implement those strategies over a one-year period.*

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*For a discusssion of other fear reduction strategies that were tested as part of the Fear Reduction Project, see Pate, Wycoff et al., 1985.

The planning process in both cities involved intensive discussions between Police Foundation and police department staff. Under the N.I.J. grant, the Police Foundation provided technical assistance to the planning groups to consider in some detail the potential value of a wide range of strategies. One of these was the newsletter idea from Evanston. The police personnel and Northwestern University social scientists associated with the Evanston project consulted with the planning groups in both Newark and Houston, which then developed their own adaptation of the idea.

Producing the Newsletters

Both cities faced substantial problems in producing a monthly newsletter. Questions of title, format, story content and physical size required substantial planning time. But the biggest issues in both sites were the editorship of the newsletter and the means of production.

The editorial control was shared by the planning groups in both cities, although the process was considerably more centralized in Newark. Both cities found the editorial tasks burdensome, especially as performed on a part-time basis in competition with other duties.

The production of the newsletter was somewhat different in the two cities. In Newark, typesetting was supplied by the city government but the actual printing was provided free of charge by the local Blue Cross/Blue Shield office. In Houston, all production was performed by the city government. Such production assistance had the advantage of providing

technical facilities and expertise to the operation without any cost to the police departments. However, there was also a disadvantage associated with this arrangement: because the editorial teams had no direct control over the printing process, substantial delays and confusion about format often occurred.

Distribution of the newsletters was by mail, in order to guarantee that certain households--and only those households--would be assigned to each experimental condition.

The size and format in Houston was four 7" x 11" printed pages folded over from a single sheet of 11" x 14" paper with two printed columns per page. In Newark the newsletter was printed on a single sheet of 11" x 17" paper folded to produce four 8 1/2" x 11" pages with three columns per page.

Both cities inserted an additional page of crime statistics in one version of the newsletter. The statistics were presented by showing a map of the streets and boundaries of the local target neighborhood. Underneath the map was a list of all the Part I crimes that had been reported to the police in the past month or so, with the day and block location of each incident. In Houston, the time of the day the incident occurred was also listed. The exact time period covered by the statistics varied from month to month in Houston (from 16 to 61 days), but not in Newark, where each issue contained data for a one-month period.

The editorial content of the two newsletters varied somewhat. The Houston newsletter contained much more safety advice and information which was not related to the fear of crime than did the Newark counterpart. The Newark newsletter, on the other hand, contained more departmental

information related to the fear of crime and solicitations to citizens to become involved in crime prevention efforts. About 30 percent of the content of both newsletters consisted of crime prevention advice; slightly less than 10 percent of the content of both newsletters was "good news" about crimes being prevented and solved.

The publication frequency in Newark was monthly from October 1983 through March 1984, resulting in six issues. In Houston five issues were published during the test period, from November through March.

Although complete cost breakdowns--especially those for personnel--are not possible, the Newark Police Department spent less than $1,000 for materials, chemicals and paper in the production of over 8,000 newsletters, including 6,000 distributed outside the target area. Private sector involvement reduced cost to the police department to less than 12¢ per copy. Postage costs were incurred only to insure tighter control of experimental conditions.

Evaluation Design

The purpose of this evaluation was to determine the extent to which the distribution of police neighborhood newsletters--with and without local recorded crime statistics--could achieve the following hypothesized effects:

- Increase the perceived accuracy of the local crime information received by program area residents,
- Increase the relative worry about property vis-a-vis personal crimes,

- o Increase the attribution of responsibility for crime prevention to residents, as opposed to police,
- o Increase the installation of household crime prevention devices, without increasing the tendency to withdraw from all risks,
- o Improve the evaluation of police services, and
- o Improve satisfaction with the area.

The evaluation design in both cities was a controlled experiment, in which households (not individuals) were randomly assigned by Police Foundation evaluators to one of three groups: those receiving newsletters with crime statistics, those receiving newsletters without crime statistics, and those receiving no newsletters at all. Within each household, individuals were randomly selected to be interviewed. Under random assignment, each household had an equal probability of being assigned to each of the three categories. This means that, with large enough numbers of households in each group, all three groups should be equivalent in their social and demographic composition. Any differences among them in the hypothesized effects of the newsletter should be due to the newsletter treatment and not due to other causes.

Because households rather than individuals were randomized, the evaluation is not strictly a test of the effects of the newsletters themselves, since not all persons interviewed can be expected to have read the newsletters sent to their homes. Such a test could only be possible

under conditions in which the newsletter was given directly to persons who would be closely monitored to insure that they read and comprehended the material. A test of that type, however, would not simulate the "real world" conditions under which printed materials are actually distributed. The strength of this test, then, is that it evaluates a delivery mechanism which, if found effective, could be adopted easily and inexpensively.

To measure the differential effects of being assigned to the three conditions, two research designs were utilized in each city. In the panel design, certain people (the panel sample) were interviewed before distribution of the newsletters began and again six months later. This design has the advantage of allowing strong statistical controls but, because of attrition, a panel often is not representative of the area in general. In addition, it is possible that interviewing persons before newsletter distribution began may sensitize the respondents to the experimental treatment. The panel data provide a strong test of what works for those particular kinds of people who were reinterviewed, but the findings may not be applicable to other types of individuals.

In the post-test only design, certain people were interviewed only once, six months after the distribution began. This design avoids the potential sensitization which pre-testing might cause and does not suffer from panel attrition. It cannot, however, use pre-test scores as statistical controls. The after-only sample data, therefore, are more representative of all the kinds of households found in the test areas in each city--but cannot be analyzd as rigorously.

rest Areas. The Newark test area had a population of 4155 persons living in 1451 dwelling units as of the 1980 census. Approximately 95% of the population was black. The Houston test area, with 7,700 residents living in 3,886 dwelling units as of 1980, was much more racially mixed--about 45% white, 36% black, 15% Hispanic and 4% Asian. These areas were not, however, chosen to be representative of the cities in which they were located but because they were matched on many different demographic criteria. Furthermore, because they are different from each other in many respects, the areas--and the results obtained from them--are not comparable.

Sample Sizes. Original samples of 660 addresses in Houston and 504 addresses in Newark--the difference in size being due solely to technical sampling factors--were randomly selected from among the households in the target areas. The addresses were assigned by a randomization process to one of three experimental conditions (newsletters with and without statistics, and no newsletter). Table 1 shows the actual number of interviews obtained in each category in each city. One randomly selected adult in each of the households was sought for an interview. For the panel samples, 127 interviews were completed in Houston and 117 in Newark. For the post-test only samples 189 interviews were completed in Houston and 181 in Newark. The difference between the original samples and the interviews actually completed in both sites was due primarily to vacant dwelling units, the non-availability (after at least five attempts) of the selected respondent, and refusals to be interviewed. The demographic characteristics of the respondents are shown in Table 2.

Table 1

Distribution of Respondents by Experimental Condition

Interview Type	Houston		Newark	
	Sample	Completed Interviews	Sample	Completed Interviews
Interviewed During Both Pre-Test and Post-Test (Panel)				
Newsletter With Crime Statistics	83	43	66	34
Newsletter With No Crime Statistics	83	42	66	44
No Newsletter	83	42	66	39
Total	249	127	198	117
Interviewed During Post-Test Only				
Newsletter With Crime Statistics	137	62	101	58
Newsletter With No Crime Statistics	137	58	101	67
No Newsletter	137	69	101	56
Total	411	189	303	181

Table 2

Demographic Characteristics of Newsletter Samples

Demographic Characteristics	Houston		Newark	
	Panel Samples	Post-Only Samples	Panel Samples	Post-Only Samples
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Sex				
Males	65 (51.2)	102 (54.0)	34 (29.1)	52 (28.7)
Females	62 (48.8)	87 (46.0)	83 (48.8)	129 (71.3)
Race				
Blacks	73 (57.5)	91 (48.4)	12 (95.7)	181(100.0)
Whites	22 (17.3)	54 (28.7)	3 (2.6)	0 (0.0)
Hispanics	22 (17.3)	37 (19.7)	- -	- -
Asian/Pacific Islander	9 (7.1)	4 (2.1)	- -	- -
American Indian	1 (0.8)	0 (0.0)	- -	- -
Other Undetermined	0 (0.0)	2 (1.1)	2 (1.7)	0 (0.0)
Average Age	36.5	35.0	46.50	42.50
Education				
Elementary School	3 (2.4)	14 (7.4)	19 (16.2)	20 (11.0)
Some High School	18 (14.2)	40 (21.2)	22 (18.8)	47 (26.0)
High School Graduate	68 (53.5)	74 (39.2)	39 (33.3)	69 (38.1)
Some College	26 (20.5)	36 (19.0)	25 (21.4)	35 (19.3)
College Graduate	12 (9.4)	25 (13.3)	12 (10.2)	10 (5.5)
Own or Rent Home				
Own	39 (30.7)	42 (22.2)	56 (47.9)	51 (28.2)
Rent	88 (69.3)	147 (77.8)	61 (52.1)	130 (71.8)

Outcome measures. The effects of the newsletter were measured entirely through the in-person interviews. Questions were asked about these major issues:

- Recalled Program Exposure,
- Perceived Accuracy of Local Crime Information,
- Fear of Personal Victimization in Area,
- Worry About Property Crime Victimization,
- Relative Worry About Property Vis-a-Vis Personal Crime,
- Perceived Area Personal Crime Problems,
- Perceived Area Property Crime Problems,
- Perceived Increase in Area Crime,
- Attribution of Crime Prevention Responsibility to Residents,
- Defensive Behaviors to Avoid Personal Crime,
- Household Crime Prevention Efforts,
- Perceived Efficacy of Defensive Behaviors,
- Perceived Efficacy of Household Crime Prevention Efforts,
- Evaluations of Police Service,
- Satisfaction with Area, and
- Assessments of the Newsletters.

Analysis and Results

The effect of the experimental conditions on each outcome measure was tested by means of analysis of covariance, using dichotomous independent "treatment" variables to represent whether each respondent lived in a household which was not mailed a newsletter, was mailed a version of the newsletter without crime statistics or was mailed a newsletter containing crime statistics. This analysis permitted the creation of adjusted mean scores at Wave 2, controlling for sex, age, education and race of the respondent as covariates. The use of such adjusted means statistically controls for differences in these characteristics which may have existed across the experimental groups even after random assignment of households occurred. Finally, as discussed by Cohen & Cohen (1975), the Wave 1 score in the panel sample for each dependent variable was also used as a covariate, producing adjusted means which were "regressed change scores" at Wave 2.

Analyses for both panel and post-test only samples were performed separately for both cities. The analyses were conducted by comparing the adjusted means of the three experimental conditions on a pairwise basis. The usual method of determining the importance of the differences found is to apply the test of "statistical significance," a technique of determining the likelihood that observed results could have occurred by chance. The standard rule in social science research is that a finding is "statistically significant" if it could not be expected to occur more than five out of 100 times (the .05 criterion). The outcome of such tests, however, are dependent on both the size of the difference observed and the size of the samples from which the data are derived. With very large samples, even minuscule differences can be statistically significant. With very small samples, even large differences may not be. In this study the .05 criterion was applied, but the reader should be aware that the samples are relatively well.

o Recalled Awareness of the Newsletter

Table 3 presents the results for selected awareness measures. From 45 to 65 percent of the Houston respondents in households sent newsletters recalled seeing one when shown a copy. In Newark, 52 to 69 percent recalled seeing one. Although five and six copies of the newsletter were distributed in Houston and Newark respectively, respondents reported looking at an average of only 1.4 to 1.8 issues in Houston and 1.1 to 1.7 issues in Newark. Only 32 to 42 percent of Houston respondents who were sent recorded crime information recalled having seen it; in Newark, from 22 to 26 percent recalled it. The highest levels of awareness were among those with the highest education.

Table 3

Recalled Exposure to Newsletter

	Houston			Newark		
	Percent Who Recall Seeing Newsletter	Percent Who Recall Seeing Crime Data	Average Issues Recalled Examined	Percent Who Recall Seeing Newsletter	Percent Who Recall Seeing Crime Data	Average Issues Recalled Examined
Panel Sample Received:						
Newsletter with Crime Statistics	65% (28/43)	42% (18/43)	1.70 (N=43)	68% (23/34)	35% (12/34)	1.74 (N=34)
Newsletter without Crime Statistics	60% (25/42)	17% (7/42)	1.38 (N=42)	59% (26/44)	7% (3/44)	1.32 (N=44)
No Newsletter	10% (4/42)	0% (0/42)	.02 (N=42)	18% (7/39)	0% (0/39)	.36 (N=39)
Post-Only Sample Received:						
Newsletter with Crime Statistics	61% (38/62)	35% (22/62)	1.84 (N=62)	52% (30/58)	22% (13/58)	1.21 (N=58)
Newsletter without Crime Statistics	45% (26/58)	7% (4/58)	1.44 (N=58)	55% (37/67)	7% (5/67)	1.10 (N=67)
No Newsletter	14% (10/69)	0% (4/69)	.09 (N=69)	21% (12/56)	7% (4/56)	.41 (N=56)

o Tests of Hypotheses

Although a total of 208 pairs ofadjusted means were analyzed, only seven of those pairs proved to be sufficiently different to achieve the .05 level of statistical significance. In the Houston panel samples:

- Respondents in households sent newsletters without crime statistics perceived a significantly greater increase in area crime than did respondents sent no newsletters,
- Respondents in households sent newsletters with crime statistics also perceived a significantly greater increase in area crime than did those sent no newsletter, and
- Respondents sent newsletters with crime statistics were significantly more likely to say they had increased levels of worry about being a victim because of reading the newsletter than did those sent the version without such statistics.

In the Houston post-only samples:

- Respondents in households sent newsletters with crime statistics expressed significantly higher levels of worry about property crime victimization in the area than did those sent no newsletters.

In the Newark panel samples:

- Respondents in households sent newsletters without crime statistics undertook significantly fewer actions to protect their home against crime than did those sent no newsletter,
- Respondents sent newsletters with statistics gave a significantly less positive evaluation of police service in the area than did those sent no newsletter, and
- Respondents sent newsletters with crime statistics perceived their local crime information to be significantly more accurate than did those sent the newsletter without such statistics.

Such a paucity of significant results, and the absence of consistency among them, can lend no support to the hypotheses tested by this evaluation.

o Assessments of the Newsletter. Residents who recalled examining newsletters indicated they found them to be interesting and informative. More than 85 percent of respondents in all conditions wanted to continue receiving the newsletters; similarly, over 85 percent in all conditions wanted to receive local crime statistics.

Conclusions

The Houston and Newark police community newsletters, although successfully implemented as planned for six months, were generally unsuccessful in achieving the hypothesized outcomes. There could be at least three possible explanations for the failure to find the expected results:

1. The measurement of program effects might have been inadequate.
2. The program might not have operationalized the theory appropriately.
3. The strength or length of implementation could have been too limited to allow for effects to have been achieved.

It is necessary to consider each of these possible explanations in order to put these findings in perspective.

Measurement of program effects could have affected the results in several ways: the size of the samples selected could have been too small to show significant effects, the sampling procedures could have provided biased results, or the measurement and analysis procedures could have been invalid. In all cases, these potential problems appear incapable of explaining the failure to support the theory. With regard to sample size, the samples selected, although constrained by a finite budget, were chosen in order to

be more than adequate to allow for proper analytical techniques to be applied. Furthermore, although this study, as any other, would have benefited from larger sample sizes, the trends demonstrated by these data were not consistent enough to have supported the theory which prompted it, no matter how large the samples might have been. The sampling procedures were based on accepted sampling principles and were carried out with considerable, documented, success. Sophisticated measurement and analysis techniques were utilized in order to maximize the reliability and validity of the results.

The second possible explanation, that the program might not have operationalized the models appropriately, deserves closer investigation. The newsletters tested were based on the same principles as, and were in most respects similar to, the newsletter in Evanston, IL, whose evaluation provided suggestive evidence that the delivery of newsletters with local crime statistics could increase crime prevention efforts without increasing fear. To that extent, they appear to have implemented the models correctly. However, the fact that the Houston and Newark newsletters failed to reinforce the findings in Evanston suggest that further comparisons of the differences in operationalization be made.

Three aspects of the operationalization of the theory--the characteristics of the persons to whom the newsletters were distributed, the method of distribution and the selection of persons to be interviewed--may have contributed to the differences. In Evanston, nearly all adult residents had graduated from high school, the majority having also graduated

from college. About one in four even had a masters degree. In contrast to this highly educated population, one-fourth of the respondents in the Houston program area had not graduated from high school and only about ten percent had graduated from college. Similarly, in the Newark program area, over one-third of the respondents were not high school graduates and only 14 percent had graduated from college. There is evidence to suggest that the more education a person has received the more likely that person is to acquire information by means of books and newspapers (Bogart, 1981). Thus, the relatively limited education levels of the Houston and Newark audiences could well have affected the willingness or ability of the recipients to read and comprehend the newsletter--especially the relatively complicated recorded crime data. Such an interpretation is supported by the fact that recalled awareness of the newsletters was generally highest among Houston and Newark respondents who had gone beyond high school and lowest among those with less than a high school degree. These results suggest that, in order to reach residents with limited education, special efforts may be necessary to make the information more readily understandable. Alternatively, newsletters may simply be an inappropriate medium for that group.

Another difference in operationalization, the method of dissemination of the newsletters, should also be considered. In Evanston, newsletters were, in most cases, hand-delivered to residents by local community groups. In Houston and Newark, on the other hand, copies were mailed to a randomly selected subset of addresses in the program area. Each of these approahces has advantages and disadvantages. Delivering newsletters through existing

community groups can take advantage of existing social networks as well as the added credibility which association with such groups might bring, especially when, as in Evanston, the newsletter is co-authored by the police and the community groups. On the other hand, such a distribution system presupposes the existence of such a community organization and, therefore, precludes its use in neighborhoods where such organizations do not already exist.

There were also differences in the types of sampling procedures among the three studies which could have affected the results. In Evanston, those interviewed were the self-identified heads of the households. In Houston and Newark, those interviewed were randomly selected adult members of the household. Each of these approaches has benefits and costs associated with it. The Evanston method probably increased the chances of interviewing a person who had seen or read a copy of the newsletter. Such an approach, however, underrepresents all others in the household who do not proclaim themselves to be "heads." The Houston and Newark approach, on the other hand, provides a good test of the general effectiveness of distributing newsletters to households without focusing on the effects on the most mature and responsible members.

The third possible explanation for the failure to find the expected results is the brevity or weakness of program implementation. This appears to be plausible. It is not unlikely that, had the newsletters been distributed for a longer time, a greater level of awareness could have been achieved. It also must be reiterated that the evaluation was of the effectiveness of distributing newsletters to households, in which

representative members were interviewed. Distribution of a newsletter to households is more practical than dissemination to particular individuals, but is also, necessarily, weaker in the effects it can demonstrate.

In the meantime, the practical questions remain: Should police departments distribute local community newsletters and should those newsletters contain recorded crime data? The results of the Houston and Newark experiments provide no clear answer to either question. They do, however, indicate the critical importance of considering the characteristics of the intended readership--especially their education levels--and the method of distribution of the newsletters in the planning of any future newsletters.

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(Box comments by James K. Stewart
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