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Law Enforcement Officers in the USDA Forest Service

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This paper reports results from the first in a series of studies evaluating perceptions of law enforcement officers (LEOs) in the US Forest Service (USFS). It is a follow-up to previous qualitative studies conducted to learn more about crime and violence in national forests and the impacts on recreation visitation and management, and test key characteristics of success in law enforcement, measure opinions about recreation visitor and public safety, and evaluate impacts to natural resources. Another incentive for conducting this study was to respond to a federal initiative for performance based measures.

Specific research objectives were to: (1) develop, pretest, and administer a quantitative survey instrument to gather information from LEOs about crime and violence at USFS sites nationwide; (2) confirm what crimes and acts of violence are occurring, the extent of crimes, and the impacts they have on public land management

and public safety; (3) ascertain whether LEOs perceive that acts of crime and violence are changing, and why; (4) determine LEOs' perceptions of the impacts of crime and violence to recreation visitors and other forest users; (5) establish measures of law enforcement success; (6) identify successful agency programs nationally, regionally, and locally; (7) test the key characteristics of law enforcement success; and (8) identify additional successful strategies used by LEOs to deal with crime in forest settings.

Methods

An email survey was administered to LEOs in the USFS. To begin, the LEOs received an e-mail message of support from the Director of Law Enforcement and Investigations (LE&I). The email survey was administered according to Dillman's Total Design Method (Dillman, 2000); that is, the first mailing was followed by three follow-up mailings. Of the 404 questionnaires sent via email, 294 were completed and returned, for a response rate of 73 percent.

Results

The LEOs were mostly male, predominantly white, and many were several years away from retirement. There was some diversity evidenced by race and gender. Their knowledge, expertise, and experience represent the best available data we have about some of the challenges LEOs face on the job.

Each LEO is responsible for a primary patrol area that totals a median 440,000 acres, although they usually patrol less than that. While on patrol, their most common

task was public relations/education/information, followed by issuing violations/warnings or performing investigations.

A major concern for the LEOs was the shortage of law enforcement officers and fire protection officers. Opinions were mixed about whether LEO authority and jurisdiction is adequate for what they believe is expected or demanded of them. Those who were dissatisfied noted that they had to depend on others to enforce state violation codes, felt that they should be deputized, and said that an outdated Code of Federal Regulations hampers their effectiveness. A large proportion of LEOs noted that they did not have adequate resources to do their jobs, with personnel and a lack of equipment topping the list of needed resources.

USFS LEOs ranked their highest job priorities as protecting National Forest Service (NFS) employees and forest users, followed by protecting forest resources, and protecting public property. They believe that the NFS line officers they most commonly interact with have a somewhat different set of priorities. Nevertheless, almost half of the LEOs felt they had good relations and rapport with the line officers they most commonly interact with. Most LEOs believed that LE&I's relationship with the rest of the Forest Service should be one of collaboration and teamwork but almost equal percentages thought that currently they are equal partners as said currently they are outsiders to the USFS organization. Most felt supported by LE&I line officers, NFS line officers, or local NFS employees.

Several types of crime are on the increase according to LEOs. Dumping of household waste, criminal damage, and dumping of landscape waste topped the list, followed by indiscriminate shooting, road hazards, thefts of public property, and thefts of

visitor personal property. Only marijuana cultivation and arson were thought to be in decline by some LEOs. Wildlife hazards, arson, weather hazards, suicides, murder, body dumping, and domestic violence were thought to remain unchanged from FY03 to FY04. LEOs were more likely to encounter dumping of household waste and landscape waste, theft of public property, and meth labs while patrolling during the week. They commonly dealt with dumping of household waste and landscape waste during daylight hours. When areas were crowded, they were more likely to encounter thefts of personal property, domestic violence, personnel threats, theft of public property, and criminal damage. More than one-third of the LEOs said they were threatened or attacked because of their job. Most said this was a common occurrence or related to drug activity.

Lack of adequate funding, safety for themselves and others, and management issues (such as morale improvement) topped the list of priorities facing the law enforcement professionals, according to the LEOs. Most LEOs believed that the NFS line officer they most commonly interact with was in general agreement with their list of priorities.

The LEOs saw forest visitors as their primary customers. They believed that forest visitors want to be assured of a safe and enjoyable experience while on the forest and that LEOs were doing their best to prevent crime and to protect the natural resources. About half of the LEOs felt that recreation visitors were mostly safe from other visitors and mostly physically safe from site features, while about one-quarter noted that these conditions vary within the patrol area. LEOs nevertheless believed that recreation visitors were much safer from others and from site features compared to visitors' own neighborhoods. In general, LEOs noted that in protecting forest users, they were

hampered by their patrol areas' large size and remoteness, coupled with a lack of resources (e.g., LE personnel, equipment, and lack of backup).

In their patrol area, most LEOs reported that the quality of the natural resources had declined during the time they worked there, as had maintenance of Forest Service facilities and developed areas. Close to half of the LEOs believed that the media portrayal of crimes against resources was mostly positive, while just over half believed that the media portrayal of fire crimes was mostly positive.

Two in ten LEOs who volunteered law enforcement success stories reported successes in solving crimes and getting convictions, good cooperation, and proactive programs. Almost half of the LEOs described special policing programs that worked well. These included visible and concentrated patrols; cooperation with other law enforcement agencies; public education; public contact; and community policing and involvement. They measured their success by the positive perceptions held, or the lack of complaints made, by the public, NFS employees, and their cooperators, and by a reduction in violations. Programs that were less successful were thought to be due to lack of support and too few officers.

Nationally, a successful law enforcement program was characterized as one with sufficient resources that is understood by those engaged in or affected by the program, staffed by highly qualified individuals, and under good leadership.

Discussion

In examining the data for common responses across questions we found that one concern for USFS LEOs is relationships. They are especially concerned about the

perceptions that others have of them, including those within and outside the agency.

Good relationships, working together, and collaboration are ways they would measure success within the LE&I program. Most problematic to having good relationships are a lack of understanding, a lack of support, and a lack of trust.

Another common response across questions indicated that one concern for USFS LEOs was resources. This was often expressed in terms of funding, personnel, and equipment. Fiscal concerns were raised often and seen as detrimental to getting the job done. In part this related to the shortage of personnel; there were not enough funds to hire new LEOs. Personnel issues also were related to concerns about professionalism among LEOs. Equipment concerns related to safety issues were raised. These concerns were both internal and related to the safety of forest users. Specific comments were raised about not having the basic equipment the job requires.

Natural resource protection was seen as important, too. Many LEOs reported increasing problems with forest users dumping household and landscape waste on National Forest lands. They reported that the quality of the natural resources had been compromised during the time they worked there. Protection of the natural resources was seen as a component of a successful LE&I program.

Safety of forest users and Forest Service employees was another concern. Urban-associated activities, drug activity, and motor vehicle violations were problematic and seen as on the rise. These were some of the same activities described in the earlier qualitative studies.

Current successes in law enforcement were described as successes in solving crimes and getting convictions, good cooperation, and proactive programs. Several of the

descriptions matched the key characteristics of success we identified in earlier studies. These characteristics included resources, collaboration, and communication. These also tie into the characteristics identified as integral to a successful law enforcement program including resources and understanding. Interestingly, not many LEOs had success stories to share.

We think there are several ways to use the results of this study of LEOs in the USFS. The identification of issues, particularly issues that are consistent across regions, could be used to prioritize law enforcement efforts. The case studies of success indicated that focus on problem areas was important to overcoming the problems. In addition, some of the successes that have occurred, in combination with a focus on the characteristics identified as integral to a successful LE&I program, could be identified as a priority focus area for officers and leaders. This has some serious implications for budgeting and staffing. Some consideration might be made about whether resource allocation is congruent with the issues identified by the LEOs.

On the face of the comments, it appeared that a successful LE&I program was all about the officers and their needs. Closer examination revealed a desire by LEOs to work for the public good, keep visitors safe, and protect the land base.

References

Dillman, D. A. (2000). *Mail and internet surveys: The Tailored Design Method*. Second Ed. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.