Analyst mines data for solutions to crime

Matthew Douglas' role is identifying, acting on patterns

By Paul Nelson

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Criminalist Matthew Douglas speaks with Schenectady Chief of Police Eric Clifford at their offices on Thursday, Dec 21, 2017, in Schenectady, N.Y. (Skip Dickstein/ Times Union)

Schenectady

Matthew Douglas is not in a squad car patrolling city streets but he is an integral part of the police department's efforts to combat crime.

"Technically, he's not on the front lines, but the way I look at it, he is the front line because everything revolves around this for what we're doing right now," said Police Chief Eric Clifford during a recent interview with Douglas at police headquarters.

Douglas serves as the department's law enforcement analytical director. "The analysis is bringing a business approach to what we're doing as a department instead of just being reactive," Clifford said.

The police chief added that he considers Douglas, who has been with the department for a decade, to be part of his management team and takes his advice seriously.

The department has become more adept at pinpointing where crime is happening, the factors behind it, and devising strategies to ensure it's not a recurring problem, added Clifford.

He said the work Douglas and his staff do are a big part why violent crime is down 34.5 percent citywide this year, compared to the five-year average.

"The primary objective is to identify crime patterns and trends and when you see patterns and trends you make them known and then dive into that data," said Douglas, who works with two other full-time crime analysts. "The crime analysis is really to be a tool for the police department to implement data-driven approaches to be more effective and efficient in law enforcement actions and strategies."

He said the data can range from intelligence-gathering from cops in the field as well as parsing raw data and is invaluable to city officials when they are considering demolishing eyesore properties.

Two core principles are place-based and people-oriented strategies plus DDACT (Data Driven Approaches to Crime and Traffic Safety).

Specifically, Douglas said so-called "hot spot" policing helps police identify high-crime areas and the specific problems there.

He said the department also relies on risked terrain modelling, which assesses the impact that landmarks, such as a corner store or bodega, may have on crime.

"It's basically more predictive hot spot analysis," added Douglas. "The program showed me that based on the data, bodegas are one of the risk factors or aggravating factor of where violence will likely occur," he said. For

years, Schenectady has been plagued by illegal activity around some corner stores.

Douglas also touted the success of focused deterrence, which identifies gangs, groups, and individuals that are more likely to be involved in violence. These individuals, who are often parolees or on probation, are mandated to attend a session with police and prosecutors, as well as the family member of a victim, who send a strong message to stop the gun violence or there will be severe consequences. They are urged to convey that message to their friends and are offered a variety of services from job training to resume-writing to help them become productive.

"My role in that is having the databases and the intelligence behind that," he said, adding he will look at everything from traffic stops to the associates of that person and where they generally hang out.

Clifford said the department has done a lot more proactive details this year with more of a focused approach.

"The directive that has been given to the commanders is consult with Matt and his unit, find out where we need help, put a plan together, and then bring in the people to go after it," he said. "The analysis that we're doing post events is to look at the tactical report that Matt does to see where we're successful and where we're not as successful."

That report monitors property and violent crime on a monthly basis to determine if it is above or below the threshold based on a five-year average.

The document also tracks individual crimes like robberies and rapes in neighborhoods throughout the city.

Above-average numbers will trigger meetings with police supervisors and commanders and increased patrols in that area.

"That's the point of this report, is to help us identify when we do have increases of particular offenses and then to do something about it," added Douglas, who focuses on violent crimes, including shootings and homicides. Clifford and Douglas also stressed the importance of CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environment Design), which includes improved lighting and line of sight as well restricting access to buildings as another way to curb crime.

Clifford described it as a "social approach" to crime reduction instead of relying solely on making arrests.

He pointed to the old "environmental design" of the Liberty Park across from Schenectady County Community College that made it an attractive spot for people to drink and panhandle. The area is being redeveloped into the Mill Artisan District, which the chief said will make Lower State Street more safe and pedestrian-friendly.

Clifford said the department is also considering sending a person to a case worker instead of arresting them for low-level offenses where there are no victims that involve poverty, addiction or mental illness. An example of this would be a person stealing from a grocery store to feed their hunger or to feed an addiction.

Douglas, who is involved with the county's burgeoning street crime task force, once had his heart set on being a cop, but changed his mind as he studied more.

"The more I learned, the more I felt like, 'I want to get into law enforcement but I wanted to do something a little bit different than becoming an officer,'" he added.

The 33-year-old Gansevoort resident, who has a bachelor's degree in criminal justice from University at Albany, is two courses away from earning his

master's degree in criminal justice. He and his wife Jo-ann have two children, ages 2 and 7.

Clifford knows the department can't rest on is laurels but has to keep implementing crime fighting techniques.

"We want to turn Schenectady into a community that people want to come and live in," he said.

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