

PRESUMED GUILTY: AN EXAMINATION OF THE CRIMINAL ACTIVITY OF INMATE VISITORS*

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As the prison population in the United States continues to grow, so does the population of friends and family members of inmates. Although there exists a widely held belief that prisons bring development and stability to economically depressed rural areas, a competing belief is that the existence of such a facility invites potential problems with the introduction of family and friends of inmates to the community. It is feared that this population will generate a variety of social problems, including high crime rates. This study investigates whether this stereotype is justified by examining the criminal involvement of visitors to inmates in the Washington State Penitentiary, a maximum security facility located in the rural community of Walla Walla. Contrary to fears and concerns expressed by community members, this study finds that inmate visitors are not heavily involved in criminal activity, and in fact account for less than 1% of the total crime. In addition, the extent of crime this population is involved in is exactly proportional to their population in the community.

INTRODUCTION

According to national prison statistics, at year end 2003, there were over 1.47 million prisoners under Federal or State jurisdiction. This total equals 482 prison inmates for every 100,000 US residents, up from a rate of only 359 ten years previously. These figures represent an annual growth in the prison population of about 3.4% since 1995 (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2005). Housing this ever increasing number of prisoners requires the construction or expansion of correctional facilities. While the demand for new facilities affects many communities, construction tends to be concentrated in specific types of locations. In particular, facilities are likely to be located in "small, economically depressed, rural communities" (Shichor 1992: 84).

Several factors account for the growth of prisons in rural areas. Many citizens consider prisons to be a LULU (locally unwanted land use) and oppose such a facility being located in their neighborhood (Krause 1992; Shichor 1992). In contrast, many rural areas actively compete for prisons due to the assumption that such facilities are a sound means of

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economic development (Blankenship and Yanarella 2004; Gibbons and Pierce 1995). In fact, "corrections officials and many state and local policymakers present prisons as a panacea for struggling local economies" (Hooks et al. 2004: 38). The assumption is that prisons will provide a short boost to the economy during the construction of the facility and will continue to provide residents with much needed jobs. However, recent research questions the validity of this presumed benefit.

One of the most extensive studies of economic impacts of prisons examined all existing and new prisons in the United States from 1960 to 1994 (Hooks et al. 2004). The greatest increase of new facilities occurred within rural counties but examinations of employment growth found that such a facility did not have the hoped for economic benefits. In fact, in regards to both "total earnings and income per capita, those rural counties without a prison grew at a faster pace" (Hooks et al. 2004: 48) than those with either existing or new facilities. Similar studies of economic impacts of prisons on rural areas have also found that the expected substantial economic boons fail to materialize (Blankenship and Yanarella 2004).

Regardless of the imagined benefits prison facilities may provide to the communities, a very real impact of the imprisonment binge has been an expansion of the numbers of individuals who are the family members and friends of inmates. Members of this group very often find themselves "doing time" in the prison host communities along with the inmate they are associated with.

Several studies have been conducted on the family of inmates in order to determine how the experience of being associated with a prisoner affects their lives (Brodsky 1975; Schneller 1976; Fishman 1990; Carlson and Cervera 1992; Davis 1992; McDermott and King 1992; Girshick 1996). Many of those who maintain relationships with inmates find that they come to share the social stigma that is attached to the inmate (Goffman 1963; Fishman 1990; Girshick 1996). This stigma is largely based on a series of negative stereotypes about the values and activities engaged in by the "kinds of people" who associate with criminals. This study examines one particular stereotype that fuels the stigmatization of this population. Specifically, we investigate the validity of the assumption that friends and family members of convicted criminals are themselves involved in criminal activity, and thus have a negative impact on the predominantly rural communities that play host to correctional facilities.

PRISON VISITORS AND CRIME: COMMUNITY FEARS

Previous studies indicate that one of the most common arguments voiced by residents opposed to having a prison in their community is that its existence will have an adverse impact upon the crime rates (Daniel 1991:130; Carlson 1991; Farrington et al. 1991:10; Shichor 1992). Beyond the potential risk of escapees from the facility committing new crimes in the community, it is also believed that family members and friends of inmates will relocate to the community and engage in a variety of criminal activities. Not only is it assumed such individuals will negatively affect the image of the community, but there are also often concerns that they will create an added burden on local law enforcement resources (Martin 2000).

This fear has been found in a number of studies of the attitudes of individuals who live in communities that house prisons. Research conducted during the construction of a new prison in Ontario, Oregon found that 45% of the survey respondents believed that an influx of inmate friends and family members to the community was inevitable and a "bad thing." Over 70% of the respondents believed that such individuals would share the "inmates' lifestyles" of criminal activity (Farrington et al. 1991). These concerns do not only relate to the family and friends of adult prisoners. One study was conducted in a community that was soon to become host to a juvenile facility. In this case, 29% of the residents were somewhat concerned that visitors would "cause problems in the area" and an additional 10% felt this was very likely (Martin 2000: 276-277). Such findings indicate a substantial portion of residents in prison host communities do harbor some concerns about individuals who associate with prisoners.

This fear of inmate visitors is based largely on stereotypical ideas about the types of people who maintain relationships with prison inmates. Residents in the Walla Walla, Washington community, home to the Washington State Penitentiary, have used such negative labels such as "drug addicts", "welfare families", "juvenile delinquents", and "biker women" to describe inmate visitors (Evanston, Farrington and Cleveland 1991). Since most community members may never have had previous contact with prison visitors, their attitudes are likely based on stereotypes and media images of this population.

However, such stereotypes are not limited to members of the general public, who may have no contact with this population, but are also found in the official sphere. One study conducted in Walla Walla examined the attitudes of criminal justice system employees. This study provided information from police officers, attorneys, sheriffs, prosecutors and court personnel, all presumably familiar with penitentiary related issues. Of these respondents, 83% agreed that one "bad thing" about the penitentiary being located in their town was that "it necessarily brings many wives, girlfriends, and family members of inmates" to the area (Ritchie 1993: 30). Similar to the Ontario results, 77% of this sample believed that the friends and family members would exhibit behaviors and habits similar to the inmates they were visiting (Ritchie 1993). Negative images and labels were used by the criminal justice system employees to describe the inmate visitor population. These representatives of the legal system described the prison visitors as "scum bags", "criminals", "dumb", "system abusers", "losers", and "leeches of society" (Ritchie 1993: 32).

In contrast to the fears of community residents, studies of prison host communities have typically not found a significant relationship between the existence of a prison and the crime rate. In a study of all communities in the state of Washington that house penal institutions, it was found that fears regarding increased crime, population increase, and the need for increased social and criminal justice services were unjustified (Lidman, Poole and Roper 1988: ch3 p. 13). This finding has been repeated in a number of studies in communities that house penal institutions, including studies in Pendleton, Oregon (Millay 1991), California sites (Krause 1992), and Canadian communities (Zarchikoff, Segger and Plecas 1981). Almost all of these studies have found that "impacts of the prison on the community have been generally positive ones but the relationship between the community and the prison is nonetheless frequently negative" (Carlson 1992: 65). These conclusions indicate that the negative attitudes held by residents are not grounded in experience and

objective facts, but rather are "influenced by expectations or more accurately, fears and concerns" (Carlson 1991: 225).

However, in some communities, including Salem, Oregon (Clark 1991) and Walla Walla, Washington (Farrington and Parcells 1991), where large correctional facilities are located, higher crime rates than expected have been found. In these communities, researchers have at least entertained the possibility that these crime rates could be influenced by the presence of the institution, either due to escapees, ex-convicts who remain in the area, or the criminality of the visitors to the institution. In Walla Walla, juveniles from inmate families have in fact been found to have higher than expected rates of contact with the police (Farrington and Parcells 1989). Therefore, the relationship between community crime rates and the presence of a penal institution, and in particular the role of inmate visitors, must be more closely examined.

This study examines the criminal involvement of inmate visitors in the rural community of Walla Walla, host to the Washington State Penitentiary (WSP). The goal of this project is to determine how many visitors actually do live in the area and, more importantly, assess whether this population has an adverse impact of local crime rates.

DATA AND METHODS

The Community of Walla Walla, Washington

Like many communities that are home to prison facilities, Walla Walla is a small, rural community. Several characteristics of Walla Walla make it an ideal place to study the phenomenon of prison impact. First of all, since it is one of the few prison communities that have been found to have higher than average crime rates (Farrington and Parcells 1991), seeking an explanation of this high rate is of importance to this community. If no clear relationship can be uncovered between the presence of a penitentiary and crime rates in a host community with high crime, this would suggest that areas with average crime rates would be similarly unaffected by the presence of the correctional institution.

A second benefit of this site is due to the relative isolation of Walla Walla from the more populated areas of the state. This makes tracking of prison related impacts, and prison related individuals, a real possibility at a level that would be unthinkable in a larger urban environment. Many host communities are viewed as hostile toward inmate families (Fishman 1990), encouraging those to associate with inmates to hide their relationships, or discouraging them from moving to the area. However, since the WSP is substantially distant from the main population centers in Washington, any friends or family members that want to maintain contact may find themselves needing to move to the area¹. In addition, blending into the background and hiding ones relationship to an inmate is much more possible in a larger community. Thus, in more urban areas, impact assessment may be dependent on community level measures of problems, such as property values or crime rates. In Walla Walla, it is possible to identify the actual visitors to the penitentiary and determine their direct impact on local crime rates through an examination of police department records. A larger community would make this sort of identification nearly impossible.

Finally, the accessibility of the WSP for conducting research is much greater than at many similar institutions. An ongoing relationship between the penitentiary and the

Whitman College Prison Research Group, made up of college students, Whitman faculty, community correctional and justice professionals, and even an occasional ex-convict, has created the opportunity for a high level of access to the prison for a number of different research projects. Through working closely with the prison superintendent, this particular research project benefited greatly from open access to visitation records and direct observation of various prison visitation practices.

Identification of Inmate Visitors

The first step in this project was to identify the population of local inmate visitors. Identifying all the friends and family members of inmates is a potentially difficult, if not impossible, undertaking for several reasons. First, stereotypes notwithstanding, past studies have indicated that this is a very diverse group (Girshick 1996), spanning different ages, races, occupations, and specific relationships to the inmate. In fact, for many, the only thing they may have in common is the fact that they are maintaining an association with someone in prison. Second, it is a group of people who do not publicize, and in fact may actively try to hide the fact that they are associated with an inmate (Evanston et al. 1991; Girshick 1996). It was thus evident from the inception of this project that it would be virtually impossible to come up with an exhaustive list of all the individuals who are friends or family members of inmates.

For this reason, we made the decision to focus upon individuals who actively maintain their association with the inmate through visitations. By focusing on this group, we were able to make use of the prison visitation records routinely collected by the penitentiary. Every time a visitor wished to see an inmate, the name, address, and relationship to the inmate are recorded (these records are described in detail in Carstens and Farrington 1992). Using these records, we created a list of all persons visiting the institution in an 18 month time period between 1990 and 1991. The list of visitors was then divided into local and other visitors. We categorized as "local" visitors any individuals with addresses from several nearby communities². Each of these communities is within an hour drive, or less, of the penitentiary and was therefore considered to be a location where inmate visitors are likely to live in order to be close to the inmate. The decision to focus on local visitors was made because it is much more likely that those who live in the area would contribute to local crime than a friend or family member who drives in from a longer distance and leaves the area after visiting with the inmate.

Inmate Visitors' Criminal Activity

A second necessary source of data for this project was the Walla Walla Police Department. Printouts of police records for an overlapping time period were made available from the Walla Walla Police Department (WWPD). These records provided very basic information, such as the name and address of the individual and the specific offense that was being reported. The printouts were searched for any individuals matching those on the list of local visitors. By comparing the names and known addresses in police records with the local inmate visitor list, we were able to determine how much, and in what capacity, these individuals were officially involved in crime. For any matches between the inmate visitor list and the police reports, the numbers and types of police involvement were recorded. Once all

the available police records had been examined, the information was compiled to determine how many inmate visitors had been named in police reports, what types of offenses they were involved in, and in what capacity they came into contact with the police.

A final task involving the police reports consisted of counting the number of criminal incidents (excluding businesses) within each form of involvement. This was necessary to determine the number of total incidents the WWPD had recorded during the time period under investigation to serve as a comparison for the number of incidents inmate visitors were involved in.

Methodological Limitations

Before discussing the findings of this research, several limitations in our data need to be acknowledged. First, there were several visitors who appeared to be local residents, due to the frequency of their visitation and the distance of their officially listed residence, but for whom there was no evidence of a more recent, local address. However, this problem only applied to a small number of visitors, thus making it unlikely to have a profound impact on our findings.

The above problem, and the possibility that a visit by a local resident went unrecorded, resulted from the record keeping system for visitation at the penitentiary at the time of the data collection. All visitor information, including updating of records, was unaided by computers and carried out by hand, requiring extensive file searching and paperwork. The practice of putting the visitation cards into a box for later record keeping could have resulted in some cards being lost or a new address on these cards having gone unrecorded in the visitation log. In addition, there was extremely limited information available in the existing records. The original application to visit a particular inmate and an ongoing record of visitation included only names, addresses, and the relationships of the visitors to the inmate. Data such as employment status, age, or race was unavailable on these records. Even the sex of the visitor had to be implied from the relationship to the inmate and occasionally the first names (such as cases where "friend" was indicated as the relationship). Therefore, although we feel this project provides an unprecedented analysis of inmate visitor criminal involvement, any conclusions about how these individuals compare with others in their socioeconomic, racial, or age categories is not possible with the available data.

A second limitation relates to the comparison of our visitor list with police records. Slight differences in the spelling of the names, the existence of aliases, and different addresses listed in the police reports than the prison records were all problems that complicated the identification of visitors in police reports. In instances where there were slight differences in the spelling of the name, but the address listed in the report was the same as the address listed at the penitentiary, it was assumed that these were actually the visitors and they were included in the data. However, in cases of different addresses, such assumptions could not be safely made and these individuals were dropped from the data. Again, while this could potentially underestimate the impact of inmate visitors on local crime, only a couple cases existed.

In addition, the police records did not include any demographic information such as the sex, age, or race of the individuals named in the report. Therefore, it is not possible to state whether subgroups of inmate visitors are more involved in crime than their

counterparts in the community. For example, if a larger percentage of female visitors are listed in police reports than the percentage of non-visiting women in the community, this is an indicator that women who visit inmates do in fact contribute disproportionately to crime in the community. However, it was not possible to accurately determine the sex of those listed in police reports. Therefore, comparisons can only be made to overall numbers of individuals in reports.

Although these limitations should be considered, we do not feel that these problems would have a significant impact on our findings. For this study, the main question is whether or not the total population of inmate visitors are disproportionately involved in crime within a prison host community, thus causing an additional burden on local law enforcement. If this population does have an adverse affect on crime rates, this may be particularly trying to rural communities, which may already have limited resources and personnel.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Characteristics of Visitors

Local prison visitors for this study consist of 270 persons, divided into 227 females and 43 males. Since relationships to inmates appear to change on a fairly regular basis, as marriages, divorce, and remarriage all occur with some frequency (Bowker 1982: 115-116), the local visitors in this study had various relationships to the inmates. A total of seven had a change in relationship with the inmate they were visiting during the period of the study. Several of these married a previous friend, boyfriend or fiancée, and others ended relationships through divorce. In addition, nine visitors maintained relationships with more than one inmate.

Regardless of the specific nature of the relationships with inmates, women were overwhelmingly more likely to visit incarcerated inmates than were men. A total of 84% of inmate relationships were with women. The largest group of these women (46%) reported having some type of intimate association with the inmate, such as being the wife, fiancée, girlfriend, or ex-wife. In addition, a more ambiguous relationship of "friend" was given by 34% of the women who visited inmates. The remaining women listed a variety of other familial relationships such as the mother, sister, or daughter. For male visitors, the overwhelming relationship was that of a friend, with nearly 59% of the male visitors indicating this type of relationship. The remaining male visitors were either fathers, brothers, or sons. Eight female and five male visitors listed "other" as their relationship to the inmate.

The local visitors constituted a total of .7% of the total adult non-institutionalized population of Walla Walla County. Whether or not this should be seen as a large proportion of the community depends upon one's perspective. Unlike fears that such individuals will become a dominating presence, they consist of less than 1% of the entire population of the county. This is however, a larger figure than any other prison community in the state (Lidman, Poole and Roper 1988).

Patterns of Criminal Involvement by Prison Visitors

While the main concern about inmate visitors is that they will be offenders in serious crimes, there are other ways that populations can be involved in crime and therefore serve to

drain the resources of police departments. For example, if inmate visitors are chronically victims of crime, and require the services of police, this not only requires financial resources to follow through on investigations, but may also take the time from officers who may otherwise be serving other community members. Therefore, all forms of involvement in police reports are included in this study. The police records in this study included five classifications of involvement: arrest, suspect, citation, witness, and victim. Table 1 displays the number of different male and female inmate visitors that were named in each of these five categories.

By far the least common form of involvement was that of arrests, with only 13 visitors being listed in this type of report. Less than 5% of the female visitors and just 7% of the male visitors were arrested according to police records. In comparison, victimization accounted for a larger percentage of inmate visitors' criminal involvement than the combined percentages of both those arrested for, or suspected of, a crime. The most common type of involvement was as a witness to crime, with almost 33% of the female visitors, and just over 44% of the male visitors being listed as witnesses to crimes in police reports.

Table 1
Distribution of Inmate Visitors Named in Police Reports by Sex and Type of Involvement

	<i>Females</i>		<i>Males</i>	
	<i>Total Visitors</i>	<i>Percent*</i>	<i>Total Visitors</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Arrest	10	4.4%	3	7.0%
Suspect	24	10.6%	8	18.6%
Witness	74	32.6%	19	44.2%
Citation	32	14.1%	13	30.2%
Victim	45	19.8%	14	32.5%

* The percentage is based on a total of 227 different women and 43 different men listed as visitors to penitentiary inmates during the time period under study.

Although the majority of inmate visitor involvement's in police reports are not as the perpetrator, this does not address the issue of whether or not this group represents a problem population by being over represented in police reports. In order to develop a complete picture of the criminal involvement of this group, Table 2 presents a more detailed analysis of inmate visitors' inclusion in police reports. Instead of just examining the number of individuals, this table examines the total number of police reports visitors are involved in to determine whether or not inmate visitors are repetitively requiring the attention of the police. In addition, this table examines the types of crimes this population is associated with.

The majority of reports across all types of involvement only list any inmate visitor once. For example, seven out of the thirteen inmate visitors who are listed in police reports for arrests had a single infraction and only two had three or more arrests. This pattern is consistent across all five types of involvement, with the majority of inmate visitors who are involved at all being listed in only a single report. Overall, since the majority of those involved in crime were only named once, it does not appear that this is a population of highly chronic offenders that account for the bulk of the crime that occurs in the community.

Table 2
Police Reports listing Inmate Visitors by Type of Involvement

	<i>Arrest</i>	<i>Suspect</i>	<i>Witness</i>	<i>Citation</i>	<i>Victim</i>
Times Involved					
Once	7	22	55	36	42
Twice	4	5	18	3	6
Three or more	2	5	20	6	11
Type of Crime					
Person	2	16	36	1	32
Property	5	12	37	4	32
Drug	3	2	2	1	0
Vehicle	2	3	4	45	1
All Other	10	26	92	11	29
Total Reports	22	59	171	62	94

When one looks at the specific criminal offenses in which prison-related family members and friends tended to be involved, the data seems to contradict common stereotypes. Both person and property crimes were represented in relatively low numbers and drug offenses were almost nonexistent³. This is especially true for the categories of arrests and suspects. Only two arrests were made in person offenses and only one of these actually involved any form of violence, that of simple assault. The other arrest was for obstructing a police officer. The most serious offense any inmate visitor was involved in was a death investigation, with one report of a visitor being a victim and another report listing a visitor as a witness. The most common types of involvement with person offenses were in the capacity of witnesses or victims. A total of fifteen reports of simple assaults included inmate visitors as witnesses and twelve more reports listed visitors as victims of this crime. Prison visitors are also harassed in various ways. A total of 15 victimization reports involved some form of harassment or threats. Overall, person offenses accounted for 21% of all visitors' police involvement. In comparison, a total of 22% of the reports involving visitors were categorized as property offenses, and only 2% related to drug offenses.

The criminal category of "all other offenses", is by far the group that accounts for the highest percent of inmate visitors' police encounters and thus requires some examination. A total of 41% of all visitors' involvements were in this type of offense. Similarly to all other types of crimes, the most common type of involvement for inmate visitors was in the capacity of witnesses. The most frequent arrest in this group of offenses involved the serving of warrants. The data did not list what crime the warrant was for so it was impossible to determine the exact nature of these arrests. The most common form of victimization was some type of accident, with a total of nineteen reports listing visitors as victims of accidents.

For all types of police involvement, the offenses that inmate visitors were implicated in were predominantly victimless offenses such as traffic citations, animal related citations, or accidents. Therefore, the question of what type of crimes inmate visitors are involved in provides a picture quite different from the expectations of community residents.

As a whole, inmate visitors were not as involved in crime as popular conception would predict. Table 3 provides the total count of police reports across each type of involvement and indicates the number of these reports that included an inmate visitor. As can be seen from this table, inmate visitors account for less than 1% of the police reports across every

type of involvement and constitute just under three-quarters of one percent of the total police reports. This figure is directly proportional to the inmate visitors' population in the community. The 270 individuals who make up the local inmate visitors represent .74% of the Walla Walla County population and are listed in .74% of the total police reports.

Table 3
Inmate Visitor Representation in Police Reports

<i>Type Involvement</i>	<i>Total Reports</i>	<i>Reports with Visitors</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Arrest	3,133	22	0.70%
Suspect	6,326	59	0.93%
Witness	22,735	171	0.75%
Citation	10,191	62	0.61%
Victim	12,984	94	0.72%
Total	55,369	408	0.74%

Inmate Visitor Representation in Walla Walla County Population	
Non-Institutionalized Adult Population	36,410
Inmate Visitors	270
Visitors Percent of Population	.74%

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Our findings suggest a somewhat different picture of the criminal activities of friends and family members of inmates than suggested by the opinions of many local citizens and justice system officials. It is clear that the involvement of the cohort of local prison visitors in police reports is proportionate to their presence in the general population. Not only is the visitor population representation in criminal reports identical to their percentage in the population, but their percentage involvement for three specific types of reports, arrests, citations, and victimization, are actually lower than their percentage in the local population. Only two forms of involvement, witness and suspect, had even slightly higher percent of inmate visitors than their population would suggest (.93% and .75 respectively). The slightly higher percentage of inmate visitors listed as suspects may be an indication of a slight bias on the part of the police department, who act on their stereotypes and signal out members of this group as possible suspects of crime.

It would be incorrect to suggest that these individuals are not at all involved in crime. In fact, further study that makes it possible to break down police reports for the wider community into appropriate comparison groups may reveal that inmate visitors have higher rates of involvement than their non-inmate visiting counterparts. However, this study clearly reveals that inmate visitors' participation in criminal activity is not so substantial that it constitutes a disproportionate share of crime in the community. On the contrary, their involvement in officially recorded criminal activity is proportionately no greater than it is for community residents. In addition, this group makes up such small percent of both the total population, and the police reports, that it is impossible to conclude that they have a dramatic impact on the crime problem in this host community. Contrary to community fears and stereotypes, this study indicates there is no justification for believing that friends and family members of inmates are highly criminal members of the community. Therefore, this study puts to rest some of the concerns facing potential prison host communities.

NOTES

1. One initial phase of this project was to examine how many inmate family members did relocate to this region. In this analysis, only 67 visitors could conclusively be documented to have moved to the region after the incarceration of their family member. This indicates that many relationships with inmates develop with members of the local community. Therefore, the inclusion of all visitors with addresses within Walla Walla county is actually a conservative measure of the impact of inmate visitors, since many of these individuals lived in this area prior to beginning a relationship with an inmate.
2. Communities classified as local are Walla Walla, College Place, Waitsburg, Prescott, Touchet, Dixie, Lowden, Eureka, Burbank, Stateline and Wallula in the state of Washington and Milton-Freewater, Athena and Weston in the state of Oregon.
3. "Person offenses" included crimes such as a death investigation, assaults of various types, sexual offenses, child abuse and obscene phone calls. "Property offenses" range from petty theft and shoplifting to burglaries and vandalism. "Drug offenses" include minors in possession of alcohol as well as possession or trafficking in more serious drugs. Speeding and general traffic offenses are included in the "vehicle offense" category. The range of specific crimes in the category of "all other offenses" is very broad. These include accident reports, animal related incidents and the serving of warrants.

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