

Promising Practices

The MBTA Transit Police Stopwatch Program

STOPWATCH aims at reducing the anonymity of youth in the transit environment and decreasing the number of youth who use stations to congregate before, during or after school.



The MBTA Transit Police are responsible for public safety in the subways, bus routes, and stations in Boston. Over 20,000 public and private school students use the MBTA each day in order to attend school. In 2005, the Transit Police Department created the STOPWATCH program.

STOPWATCH aims at reducing the anonymity of youth in the transit environment and decreasing the number of youth who use stations to congregate before, during or after school. “The underlying theory is that if we reduce anonymity and get to know these kids, they won’t do things they might do if they think no one cares or that no one can identify them,” explained Lt. Det. Mark Gillespie of the Transit Police, who has headed up the program since its inception. To reduce anonymity, a collaboration that includes school headmasters, assistant principals, youth workers, probation officers, Boston Police officers, Boston School Police, and private youth-serving organizations was developed to attend STOPWATCH.

Each week, Lt. Gillespie sends out a bulletin advising STOPWATCH partners of the 5 to 10 selected stations where STOPWATCH partners will be present in the station during the morning rush hour and/or the after school rush hour. Stations are chosen based on frequency of problems, rumors of fights, and

passenger complaints. “This is community policing in every sense of the word. We let kids know that a community is watching them and they know too that a community is caring for them so we find that we get a lot of kids asking us for help and there is always someone in the group who can.”

The impact of STOPWATCH has been noticeable: “We are seeing a major deterrent impact in this approach to policing,” said Chief Paul MacMillan of the Transit Police who also noted that MBTA arrests of juveniles was at the Department’s lowest rate since 1998. The program won the American Public Transportation Association Award for Innovation in 2005 and was also selected in that year as a semi-finalist for the prestigious Webber-Seavey Award of the International Association of Chiefs of Police.

In 2007, STOPWATCH generated TRUANCYWATCH when MBTA Transit Police noted that many youth were using MBTA stations during the school day and/or heard their partners ask youth why they hadn’t been to school. Massachusetts does not authorize officers to arrest truant youth; at best the state’s status offense system can issue a legal designation of a student being a child in need of services (CHINS). In a city with only 4 school officials to follow up on student absences for over 70,000 students, the involvement of the MBTA Transit Police and its partners has increased the school system’s reach.

Lt. Gillespie and Sgt. Michael Adamson developed a survey instrument and worked with STOPWATCH partners to survey youth about their absences from school. In the 2007-2008 academic school year, TRUANCY WATCH gathered over 850 surveys; as of this writing in the 2008-2009 academic school year, over 500 surveys have been completed.

Boston’s Private Industry Council, which focuses on high school drop outs and truancy as a predictor of dropping out, compiled the results of the survey. (See [Link](#).) “Kids are generally quite willing to

tell us why they are not in school,” said Lt. Gillespie. “Most of the time it’s because they are unengaged with their own education, or they have been suspended for bad behavior, or because they have serious problems. It really hits you when a kid says, ‘Can you help me? I am so depressed.’ Or you see a pregnant 16 year old and wonder who is there to catch these kids when they are obviously falling,” he added.

The impact of TRUANCYWATCH, which was recently featured on WGBH’s *Project Dropout* series (www.projectdropout), has been impressive. Kathy Hamilton of the Boston PIC noted that “The project is an innovative way for partners from different sectors to come together to address a problem. The data we are getting is valuable, too. The most recent finding is that students interviewed, though caught skipping school, are still willing to engage with adults and talk about school with them. That shows that they haven’t given up, and that it’s worth figuring out how to keep them in school.”

Documentation on STOPWATCH and TRUANCYWATCH

- [StopWatch Expectations for Partners 2008-2009](#) [PDF]
- [StopWatch Mission Statement 2008-2009](#) [PDF]
- [StopWatch Orientation Rules 2008-2009](#) [PDF]
- [StopWatch Strategic Plan 2008-2009](#) [PDF]
- [Truancywatch Questionnaire](#) [PDF]
- [StopWatch – Final Week 42](#) [PDF]
- [StopWatch - November 16, 2009](#)
- [StopWatch - 2010, Week 23](#) [PDF]

For more information on STOPWatch and TRUANCYWatch, contact **Lt. Det. Mark Gillespie**, MBTA Transit Police, 617-222-1062, mgillespie@mbta.com