®FC¯What is Community Policing?

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October 12, 1991

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Introduction

Community Policing is a label that has been attached to a cluster of ideas about how municipal police departments might be better used to deal the problems of today's cities -- crime, drugs, fear, and the decline of civility. Often, the concepts are presented as though they come from outside the field of policing, and repudiate much current practice. In fact, the ideas come from within the field, and are built on the solid base of policing's past accomplishments. They are the ideas that creative police officers and managers come to as they confront the challenge of mending the social fabric of today's cities.

Although there are many different particular activities associated with the broad concept of Community Policing including foot patrols, mini-police stations, a focus on repeat calls for service, and increased emphasis on order maintenance, there are really only a few core ideas that define community policing, and they do so at a slightly higher level of abstraction than the listing of these particular activities. From my perspective, four such ideas are essential.

Look to the Community to Achieve Success

The first is that the police department and individual police officers must look to the community to achieve success. This is true partly because partnerships with the community are important means of reducing crime. It is also true, however, because, ultimately, it is the quality of community life that is the standard against which police performance must be measured.

A basic assumption in community policing is that the community rather than the police must be the first line of defense against crime and disorder. The police have long understood this basic principle -- at least at some level. They have known intuitively what two decades of police research have now clearly established: the police cannot be effective in arresting offenders or controlling crime unless victims and witnesses from the community are prepared to help them. Without vigilant citizens, the entire, expensive police apparatus would grind to a halt.

But recent experiences in dealing with the crack epidemic has taught a slightly different and even more important lesson about the role of citizens in controlling crime. If the citizens are not intimidated by drug dealers or teen gangs, if they can form effective relationships with the police, citizens can themselves drive drug dealing from their neighborhoods. That can happen in poor neighborhoods as well as rich; in black as well as in white. In short, when communities are mobilized, they can exert effective, informal social control over their own neighborhoods, and this informal control supplements that control that can be produced by the police. From this observation, it is only a small extension to imagine what could happen if the police could restore morale and dignity to hard-pressed urban communities.

Valuable as communities are in "co-producing" crime control with the police, that is not the only reason that the police must look to the community to achieve success. It is also true that, in the end, what the police are trying to produce is at least partly a state of mind in the community. Security is not only a statistical fact identified with the probability of being victimized. It is also a subjective feeling that we know now can be produced by eliminating some of the "signs of crime", and by establishing a consistent, reliable, personalized, police service to citizens. Enhancing the sense of security is key to the success of policing. It may also help to reduce citizens' reliance on some of the more dangerous forms of self-defense

(such as the purchase of weapons), and expand the community's tolerance. If they know the police are reliably at their service, more minor forms of misconduct can be tolerated than if the police cannot be counted on.

Find Ways to Stay Close to the Community

If success ultimately lies in achieving an effective working partnership with the community (as both a means and an end), it follows inevitably that police departments must find ways to stay close to the community. Several opportunities present themselves.

First, it is important that the police manage their calls for service not simply as a system that allows them to respond rapidly to serious crimes, but also as a system that ties them to the community they serve. What comes over that network is a flow of citizens needs. Only a small fraction of those calls are crime calls. Of those, only a small fraction require an emergency response. The majority of calls are for other less crime related, or less urgent services.

In the past, the non-crime calls have been considered "garbage" calls and given relatively short shrift. This seemed desireable as a way of conserving limited police resources, and ensuring that some cars would always be available to deal with crucial crime emergencies. Obviously, this still makes sense. But the force of the argument is lessened when one recognizes that the overall crime-fighting effectiveness of the police is built on the relationship to the community. In that world, giving service to the community, even when their calls are not crime-related, becomes a way of building trust and partnership. That, in turn, increases the likelihood that they will call when crimes occur, and will be emboldened to take other steps to control crime and disorder in their neighborhoods.

Second, in the interests of staying close to the community, it is important that patrol assignments and dispatching rules be changed. Fixed assignments to specific geographically defined beats become important to ensure the continuity of the relationship between the officer and the community. Foot patrol, park and walk programs, and other devices help to establish face to face relationships with the healthy aspects of local communities. And being willing to sacrifice some response speed to keep patrol officers in their local areas increases the chance that when a car comes to a service call, it will include an officer who knows the local terrain.

Third, it is important for mid-level managers in the police department to establish ties to local communities as well as police officers. The community is not encountered just one at a time in individual calls for service. It also appears in particular groups who want to make demands for certain kinds of services. It is important that the police learn to listen to these demands, and to accommodate them where possible. Obviously, not all demands can be accommodated. Resource limitations, conflicts among groups, and constitutional restrictions may make it impossible for the police to respond to specific group requests. But the point is that the organization should view such demands as providing useful information about what would be valuable to do rather than as burdensome or disruptive demands.

Commission the Officers

To provide service to the community in the interests of developing effective crime-control partnerships, internal working relationships within the department must be changed. In essence, a great deal of initiative and responsibility must be pushed down to operational levels. That is necessary to ensure that operational officers have the flexibility to respond to the problems that the community brings to their attention, and feel the full weight of their responsibility and accountability to the community.

In the past, police departments sought quality in policing by trying to eliminate discretion. The administrative devices included strict chains of command, close supervision, and written rules and procedures. Such measures were valuable insofar as they offered guidance to well motivated officers on the street. They were a problem, however, insofar as they suggested that, when all was said and done, we really weren't dependent on the quality of the individual officers, and insofar as these things exposed officers to arbitrary actions by their superiors, and blunted the development of their own sense of responsibility for their conduct.

Contemporary thinking about achieving quality and control in service organizations is now turning away from reliance on these familiar administrative mechanisms, and relying more on such things as defining the broad values to which organizations must commit themselves, establishing individual accountability for the achievment of proper results rather than compliance with rules, and relying as much on evaluations by customers and peers

as by supervisors. What many private sector firms have discovered is that they can achieve greater speed, flexibility, and quality in their operations by trusting their workers -- in effect, commissioning them to do the job right -- rather than by trying to control them. Such changes also seem consistent with the aspirations of community policing

Summary and Conclusion

Community Policing challenges some conventional ideas about policing. But it does so to go beyond the current demonstrated capabilities of policing. It seeks to prevent crime from occurring as well as to respond effectively after the fact. It seeks to still fears and widen tolerances as well as to arrest offenders. It views the demands that individual citizens and community groups make on the police as important clues about what might be done to improve the quality of life for citizens, and as a way of mobilizing the communities to help them control crime. And it seeks to ensure quality in daily operations not only through rules and supervision, but also by encouraging initiative among officers, and making them accountable to citizens and their fellow officers for quality performance rather than simply to their superiors.

If successfully implemented, Community Policing offers significant advantages to the field. It offers to make police departments more effective in dealing with the problems that urban communities now face. It promises to found the institution of public policing on the bedrock of community support as well as on professional legitimacy. And it holds open the possibility that policing may truly become a valuable profession. It is a set of ideas that merit your continuing support.