Community Policing
Comments on the Brussels 2000 Conference

Robert R. FRIEDMANN

The Brussels 2000 Conference on Evaluating Community Policing has brought together an interesting mix of academicians, police practitioners and even those involved with the legislative process. A review of the literature, various professional sessions on community policing, academic conferences such as the American Society of Criminology, and the International Society for Criminology that feature discussions on community policing, have pointed out time and again the promise and problem enveloped in the concept of community policing.

The Brussels conference is no exception but it had the added advantage of a more in-depth opportunity to discuss the issues and point out how far policing has progressed and yet, how far it still has to go.

It appears that community policing fluctuates between those who just see it as another policing strategy such as foot patrol, horse patrol, bike patrol or even mere public relations and those who see it as the ultimate panacea to solving society's ills. I see myself closer to those belonging to the latter and therefore, I see it an important task to identify why community policing, at least in its limited sense, cannot obtain its objectives without a larger social movement to help in the process.

If community policing is merely another policing strategy then its value is more than limited. If it is a panacea it may never be obtainable. This is the precise dilemma of this approach. The more limited it is as a strategy the less likely it is that it will make a significant difference that will be everlasting. At the same time that is exactly the risk with trying to have it as an all inclusive concept. Namely, that it is questionable as to its effect as well as to its potential lasting impact. Let me elaborate.

Within the last twenty years community policing was introduced, practiced (at least to some degree), and adopted in country after country. However, when it remained a limited strategy it had limited effects that were not largely noticed by the community. Yet, when community policing was implemented as a philosophy it has encountered almost insurmountable organizational and societal obstacles.

On one hand nothing is relatively "simpler" than to introduce a strategy (or even better say, tactic) such as foot patrol, bike patrol or such. I use the term "simple" in a relative sense because the challenge is internal as it is limited to the police organization. It has to do with training, with budget allocation, with deployment or redeployment, communication, supervision, evaluation, rewards, and a decision to continue or discontinue such activities.

None of these challenges are truly simple because to make them happen requires organizational skills, an organizational structure, culture, acceptance, buy-in and assessment of effectiveness. Yet such implementation depends on the police department as a fairly closed organization. Namely, the decision is made by the police agency, is implemented internally, assessed internally and coped with inter-nally. This is true even when some community input and feedback is sought (and received). The final decision and the jurisdiction is in the hands of the police agency.

However, for community policing to be closer to the other model of an overarching philosophy such implementation does not stop (or for that matter has to begin) with the police agency. There are at least two more elements that are powerful players. The first is a host of other agencies from the public sector (public social service agencies and municipal/county and other governmental agencies such as departments of Corrections, Transportation, Public Works, Parks and Recreation). The second is the "community" itself with its civic and private organizations (to include but not limited to: voluntary association, advocacy groups, Chamber of Commerce, as well as the clergy, and various neighborhood groups). Here emphasis is given to a far wider social process that requires the police to carry out their duties in a far more distinct fashion (yet more challenging) than used under reactive policing methods.

And this is exactly what proponents of community policing may have not fully realized. While the rhetoric is appealing, attractive, and even persuasive, "full" implementation requires a massive social organizational change not only on the part of the police as an agency but from other organizations as well. Indeed, the potential "partners" mentioned above (and more) have to take it upon themselves to become part of this social movement that changes how societal problems are solved.

Therefore any evaluation of community policing needs to take into account that this is a slow process and it has to look beyond the police if there is a real desire to implement community policing successfully. In a sense, evaluation should be seen

more as monitoring the extent to which a given activity brings the process closer to its ideal conceptualization, not whether it has merely "succeeded" or "failed."

To have a cross-organizational cooperation towards the goal of proactive problem-solving (which is part of what community policing is about) needs a level of understanding of organizational realities that recognizes personnel changes, slowness of adaptation, resistance to change and doing business differently than before.

Given that community policing is approximately 20 years old it is at its very best in a beginning phase. Recognizing that it is a social movement - and hence the most important development in the policing movement itself - will go a long way towards strengthening it so that it has sufficient breath to carry it forward for the long haul and an actual chance to succeed.