

Community Policing: Some Conceptual and Practical Considerations

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Originally published in: *Home Affairs Review*, 1996, "Community Policing: Some Conceptual and Practical Considerations," Volume XXXIV (No. 6): 114-23 (in Hungarian).

Background

Much rhetoric about getting tough on criminals or about establishing community policing lack the understanding of why crime takes place and therefore are short-sighted in terms of possible impact by the proposed policies. Typically, these policies are ideologically driven and if they have any merit, there is a gap between what these programs propose and how they are being implemented. Community policing is one such example. Recently touted by public officials as a step in the right direction - some even suggest it as a panacea for solving crime - community policing has been either misunderstood or not well, or fully, implemented.

Very little public discussion of what crime is and understanding of why crime takes place can be found. Without understanding what "produces" crime in society how can any intervention have an impact on it? The legal approach to crime is interested in the very limited focus on the exact point where crime is defined as simply a violation of a (written) law. In this sense, any jurisprudence system (of the federal government or that of local government) views the violation of the law as a conflict that now needs to be settled between the violator (an individual or a corporate entity) and the violated entity (other individuals, corporate entities, the state). Here crime is viewed as a specific behavior that needs to be reacted to, punished and hopefully deterred. Reasons for committing the crime may be used later in legal procedures when sentencing takes into consideration various mitigating circumstances. However, beyond this relatively narrow focus it is fair to state that crime is a societal product that agreeably we need to have less of. In a society that is used to producing more, (consumable goods) curbing production (as in smoking, heart ailment, skin cancer) is a most difficult task that requires a comprehensive - not a patchwork - approach of a very large magnitude. Community policing seems to offer the appropriate rhetoric and conceptualization, and bears a promise for a better future. However, it risks the danger of its self-demise if there will be no insistence on a better understanding of the causes for crime and on fully implementing a comprehensive policy.

Other than counting crimes (as they are reported) and offering dubious ranking systems, there is little public discussion of the underlying causes of crime. There is also very little offering of a justification or rationale for why a certain (policing or other) strategy will reduce crime. Community policing, if taken seriously, can offer such a comprehensive approach to reduce crime. Within this strategy, law enforcement acts as a catalyst in a process that changes itself, other social service agencies and the community, simultaneously. Considering the fact that about 80% of police activity and response to calls is non-criminal in nature and that police can do very little to prevent a crime that is about to happen, the discussion then has to focus on a more long-term, proactive approach. This stems from the very simply fact that crime is produced by societal forces that are non-stop-able by police. This is true both about the nature of crime (i.e., such as in crimes of passion) and the volume of crime and its economic appeal

(i.e., drug use, prostitution). If this premise is acceptable then its derivative is to look at social control issues as encompassing more than formal law enforcement. Rather, normative behavior, evasion of norms, violation of laws and the forces that produce (or could minimize) them should be the focus of any policy with reasonable chances for success.

Any policing policy that adopts proactive planning assumes that intervention needs to be targeted to effectively reduce the amount of crime produced in (and by) the community. Until rhetoric about community policing appeared in law enforcement circles in the early 1980s, it had been assumed that crime control is the sole responsibility of police. This was particularly emphasized during the "professional period" of the policing movement in the U.S. which itself developed out of a reaction to police brutality and corruption because of the sense of it being too close to the community. However, with police professionalism came along the distancing of police from the community and thus the loss of valuable intelligence and the necessary contacts that breed trust and positive relationship.

In the early 1980s community policing became a "buzz-word" in policing circle, replacing such terms as police-community relations, team policing, and problem oriented policing. However, to date, community policing is still an illusive term meaning different programs and approaches to different police departments. In fact, until 1992 there was not a definition available in the literature. Despite the ever increasing popularity of the term the closest to a definition in the professional literature were two sets of ten principles on community policing. The first was offered by John Alderson (1979) and the second by Trojanowicz and Bucqueroux (1990). Alderson's ten principles related to policing under conditions of freedom with emphasis on guaranteeing personal freedom and free passage while the principles offered by Trojanowicz and Bucqueroux have more to do with the implementation of the concept in a given police force. Yet in most communities the shift to community policing was characterized by introducing (or re-introducing) foot-patrol and the beat officer returning to the neighborhood.

Community policing defined

To fill this void and to help introduce a tangible measure (or measures) of the concept, Friedmann (1992:4) offered in the following definition of community policing as a far more comprehensive approach than was known in the literature to date:

Community policing is a policy and a strategy aimed at achieving more effective and efficient crime control, reduced fear of crime, improved quality of life, improved police services and police legitimacy, through a proactive reliance on community resources that seeks to change crime causing conditions. This assumes a need for greater accountability of police, greater public share in decision making, and greater concern for civil rights and liberties.

This proactive stance as held by community policing embraces a far more comprehensive perspective where emphasis is given to achieving more than just crime control; nontraditional issues such as fear of crime, quality of life, improved services, and police legitimacy are also

included. However, the departure point of this definition lies not in the greater inclusiveness of its policing objectives but in its focus on crime producing conditions as the likely potential source for reducing crime and achieving the other objectives as well. Therefore, this definition points out that it is important to focus on the following three components: (1) intra-departmental changes, (2) inter-agency cooperation and (3) the community, its needs, and its resources.

(1) Intra-departmental changes

In order for police to achieve better rapport with the community, departments need to become and operate more like open systems. This has tremendous implications on the organization of police departments. The **structure** of police departments needs to be more decentralized to allow better deployment in the community and more effective use of officers and response to citizens and in building the network relations with citizens. It is important to have a more flat rank structure; this will allow officers to continue good performance without necessarily aspiring for command positions, and it will improve the quality of police personnel in the field. The use of more civilians in auxiliary and liaison functions will generate closer ties with the community as well as free officers to do police work.

Internal **communications** need to be exchanged at the lower level to break the relatively rigid chain of command and to improve the flow of information. Police **supervision** should enhance interaction between all levels (officer-supervisor and officer-community) in order to expand the spans of responsibility of officers. Officers should have greater **discretion** to empower them in their decision-making and to encourage more flexibility in non law enforcement situations. This will make police work far more efficient and will enhance performance on the part of officers who are expected to do more in a position of trust.

Police **deployment** should be proactive, preventive and community-oriented, in addition to (not instead of) reactive policing. The worst mistake that community policing proponents can make is by advocating that it, as proactive policing, completely replaces traditional reactive policing. The two need to be there side by side as there are incidents which require immediate reaction. Yet it is imperative upon police to be involved in long-term preventive activities along with other service agencies and citizens alike. **Recruitment** should emphasize higher educational levels and seek people-oriented, service/mediation-centered officers. To date many of the officers still join the force having in mind adventure and the (sense of power because of the) use of force. A differential recruitment policy will change this image and will enhance the self-selection process to improve future police personnel. It will also improve the likelihood of police to become a respected occupation and also enhance the likelihood that it will be equalized among other social services.

Training should expand on interpersonal skills and become more community-oriented. This is particularly relevant as a relatively small proportion of the officer's training is dedicated to such issues. Officers' **performance evaluation** should emphasize measurable community oriented activities (contacts, coordination, assistance) and the **reward structure** should acknowledge community oriented efforts, offer tangible salary raises and intangible recognition for performing accordingly. Finally, it is important to have community policing adopted force-wide and not relegated to special units.

(2) Inter-agency cooperation

Inter-agency cooperation should encourage increased scope and level of **interaction** between various agency levels (not only between department heads). Agencies (police and other social services) should develop a better understanding as to what constitutes overall community **needs** and how they can, by working together, improve their response to those needs. Agencies should have systematic information about the availability of **resources** and create a climate that rewards **cross-jurisdictional** cooperation and minimizes friction. It is imperative that agencies provide incentives for **cooperation** at a comprehensive level. Earlier (1992) I have offered the concept of the "Super-Agency" where a board-of-directors type group will have coordinating functions that should enhance better delivery of services. This is one of the key elements in community policing as it operates to increase the sense of partnership and the understanding that police cannot control crime alone. The value of the Super-Agency is not merely in the development of partnerships but also in offering practical solutions to problems that may somehow not receive the proper attention from the services that are responsible for them. This could be the coordination of utilities work in a city or the development of a working definition for the identification of health care need and criminal justice reaction in cases of physical and sexual child abuse.

This envisioned "Super-Agency" is the civic body most likely to effectively coordinate the matching of needs with services. It should act as a dynamic liaison between citizens, social service agencies and law enforcement in an attempt to focus efforts to eradicate crime causing conditions in the community. It is not an additional bureaucracy but a coordinating "hands-on" implementation oriented body.

Only when law enforcement, other social service agencies and the community work together, through the "Super-Agency," will there be a chance that these concerted efforts will bring about the results we so much desire for.

(3) The community

The third, and perhaps most important, component of community policing is the reliance on the community itself. The improving of police and (coordination among) other services to the community could go so far if nothing changes in the community itself. Social and ethnic tensions that result in group crime or immigration frictions that result in individual crime are but a few examples to the extent that even when services are available (and that is not be taken for granted) the underlying problems in the community continue to generate the conditions that breed criminal behavior. In order to better handle community issues it is essential to increase the knowledge we have about the community. There needs to be better **mapping** of crime as well as profiling of community populations, networks, problems, needs and available resources. There needs to be far greater **reliance on communal institutions** such as the family, school, church, and various civic associations that will make participation in crime less acceptable than it is today. There needs to be increased proactive planning and a climate supportive of wide-based coordination of community-oriented activities.

A window of opportunity

While it is more and more common to have police departments in the West adopting community policing as a policy and as a strategy, it is important to place this in some historical perspective. Within less than 15 years the U.S., for example, has gone from seeing community policing as an esoteric approach to policing to having the President and Congress allocating billions of dollars to support its development all over the country. In many cities across the U.S. there is a growing realization that partnerships are to be developed, that it is important to assist police, and that police cannot do policing and crime control alone. Projects and policy statements often emphasize this important and necessary proximity. Business associations, business advocacy groups, civic groups, and voluntary associations are increasingly willing to sit together, plan together and work together in this realization that crime is too big for any one agency to control it. Yet, this climate is only a few years old and there is no guarantee that it will last long if the political environment will cease to be supportive of it (and in the U.S. there are already signs to that effect). Thus there is a danger that within a few years, community policing may have become just another policing fashion. With this realization it is important to look at community policing as offering a window of opportunity to look at crime in a different manner than we have been used to and as such to take the utmost advantage of this window before it closes for a long time.

Potential pitfalls

In the adoption of community policing attention needs to be given to avoiding certain pitfalls that singularly, or taken together, may endanger the proper implementation of this strategy. It needs to be clear that community policing is not simply equivalent with foot patrol. While officers on foot have the statistical chance of getting closer to the community and meeting more people, what is more important is what does the police department as a whole do and what the specific officers are doing. Foot patrol without the elements of building relationships with the community will not amount to much. An officer (or two) foot patrolling a beat for eight or ten hours may not achieve much if all is done is the walk. Officers need to know what are the human factors that make their beat more vulnerable to crime. Some of those they could take care by themselves; for some others they may need the assistance and intervention of various other agencies, services, and companies in order to make a difference. The point is that officers may (or should) know about potential problems well before they turn into criminal ones.

As one of the definitions and aims of community policing being the reduction of fear of crime, it is important to note that most police projects or new experiments (such as foot patrol) are viewed positively by citizens and are reporting a reduction of fear of crime. Often, then, the reduction of fear of crime becomes the tangible outcome of a policing project. Indirectly fear reduction becomes then the only tangible result that police are able to deliver in a community. This is partly so because crime figures are more difficult to influence but mostly these are due to the fact that we tend to measure police success by crime figures or lately by fear of crime. For community policing to become successful it needs to be assessed differently. In the same manner that an officer needs to be evaluated on the basis of his/her community policing performance (and not merely by the number of tickets and/or arrests made) and then rewarding accordingly, so is there a need for community policing to be assessed by the host of variables described earlier in this article and not merely by traditional measures. In fact, recently,

Rosenbaum (1994) reported several studies that assessed the success of community policing by using exactly such nontraditional measures and showed it to have a positive impact.

What complicates things somewhat is the expectation that when a new strategy is introduced it will be successful and hence measurable indicators will point that out. It is entirely possible and even expected that if community policing is successful, attitudes toward police and crime, as well as crime itself will initially go up rather than down. This is reasonable to expect because of at least two considerations: first, the sensitizing of residents may make them more alarmed by crime, and second, with the building of trust and changing the relationship between police and community, citizens may (be willing to) report crime (and public order related behavior) more than before. If measured appropriately (with allowance for time lag) crime statistics could well reflect this reality. Therefore, committing to an immediate reduction of crime may be a very irresponsible thing to make for police and/or civic leaders. Even when crime is "eventually" reduced, police and civic leaders should be most cautious about taking credit for it because they will be held accountable when crime figures will go up. Comments by Commissioner Bratton of New York City to the effect that crime went down in his city due to aggressive policing (known there as "result oriented policing") were justifiably challenged by criminologists at the 1995 meeting of the American Society of Criminology in Boston.

Community policing needs to be there for the long-term, it needs to have a thorough plan and participants ought to fully buy into it and not merely pay lip service to it. Along with this long term view it is essential to secure external support so as not leave police alone in their battle with crime.

Concluding remarks

I would like to take this opportunity to use Atlanta as an example on how things should be done and how some should not have been done in connection with community policing. As in many other cities, Atlanta has used various strategies such as foot patrol and bicycle patrol in its effort to introduce policing innovations. When Mayor Campbell ran for office three years ago his highest political platform item was community policing. Three weeks after assuming office he stated that crime went down in Atlanta by 60%. While his facts were quickly called on by the media, as was the probability of attributing such drastic change to his very short term in office, his enthusiasm for community policing did not waver. He admitted his mistake and yet went on to talk about community policing as if it was foot patrol. At the same time, he encouraged several activities that had public safety components in them but were seen as being apart from policing. Under his administration, a citizen-initiated proposal was funded by the federal government to empower citizens and received a \$100 million in direct support along with \$150 million in tax incentive to improve the economic conditions in the most needy areas.

In addition to the Mayor's efforts, the Atlanta Regional Commission set out to plan for the city's metropolitan area's expected growth from 2.5 million to more than 4 million by the year 2020. Major concerns were given to public safety issues and how to alleviate them by using community policing principles. President Jimmy Carter's grassroots effort known as The Atlanta Project has certainly added an important component for the improvement of neighborhood conditions and along with it Atlanta has evidenced the growing realization of some of its leading business advocacy groups (such as Central Atlanta Progress) of the need to treat public safety as more than merely a police problem. In 1995 the metropolitan area received another major federal grant that included some 29 different components to offer a

comprehensive approach to cope with community conditions leading to crime. One of these components is community policing and the grant mandated the provision of community policing training to 60 law enforcement jurisdictions in the Atlanta metropolitan area. These agencies include more than 6,700 officers and training is provided to officers from the beat to the chief level as well as to elected and appointed officials (mayors, county commissioners, and city and county managers).

It remains to be empirically examined whether all these efforts will make a difference. One statement could be made almost a-priori. Traditional, bracketed and reactive approach to crime is necessary but is limited in what it could do to affect crime. Theoretically and practically it is reasonable to expect that community policing will make a difference.

Finally, how is all this relevant to Hungary? The relevance lies in the following societal processes. With the transition evidenced in Hungary from 1990 and onward, it will take Hungary far less time to reach the crime level of the West if proper action is not taken in a timely fashion. The country is already evidencing an increase in property offenses and some unprecedented examples of violent behavior reminiscent of Western style crime. At the same time police have lost the strong grounds they had during the previous regime and now are judged by the services they provide and not by the power they exert.

Therefore, it is in the best interest of the Hungarian Police to plan ahead, anticipate the potential growth of crime and devise timely interventions. As seen in this article, the comprehensive approach offered by community policing is an all-encompassing, agency (and community) changing process. It is however, evidencing an excellent window of opportunity to consider new policing innovations and at the same time implement many of the necessary structural changes that have to do with recruitment, training, communication, structure, work performance, supervision and rewards as well as building cooperation with other community entities.

It may be an extreme irony that at the time that the U.S. displays its typical sense of individualism, the greatest policing innovation focuses on developing an increased reliance on and cooperation with the community. It is even a greater irony that when Hungary is starting to walk in this new path of individualism the best advice it could get from abroad is to continue to nurture some of the characteristics it so "naturally" held prior to the transition. Nonetheless, this seems to be a reasonable course for planning and action for the next century.

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