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HIGHLIGHTING

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Community Policing: Promises and Challenges

by

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ABSTRACT

Community policing has been used extensively in the '80s to describe various programs and approaches to improve police work through enhancing interaction with citizens, demonstrating greater sensitivity to community needs, showing greater police presence in problem areas, and attempting to be more responsive to issues not traditionally dealt with by police. This article explores the framework of police-community coproduction, citizens' attitudes toward police, and implications of community policing for the present and the future. The article suggests that, while community policing may not be the panacea for law enforcement, it should be further developed and deployed in a democratic society.

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of community policing seems to convey a clear understanding of what it is and is not. However, a closer look provides us with more questions than answers. It may be no more than a buzzword used to denote an approach or a specific program and at any rate is found to be elusive in terms of a straightforward definition.

The experience of various police efforts directed at enhancing rapport and cooperation with the community to achieve greater effectiveness and efficiency in their work is well documented in this country and abroad (see Decker, 1981; Eisenberg, Fosen & Glickman, 1973; Fink & Sealy, 1975; Friedmann, 1987; Greene & Mastrofski, 1988; Kelly & Shellow, 1975; Klyman & Kruckenberg, 1979; Murphy, 1984; Reasons & Wirth, 1975;

Robinson, 1984; Rosenbaum, 1984, 1986; Singer, 1975; Skolnick & Bayley, 1988; Trojanowicz, 1983; and Whisenand, Cline & Felkenes, 1974). The importance of positive relationships between the police and the community stems not only from the belief that the police serve the community, and that the latter should be law-abiding, but also from the understanding that the community can aid the police in daily operations, function as a crime-reducing factor, ensure the provision of better police services and protection, and ensure greater public concern and involvement in policy decision-making, as well as provide the police with needed support. This, after all, makes sense: If we view the community as one among several crime sources --and a key one at that-- why not focus on community forces to minimize its criminogenic impact? In other words, good cooperative efforts are assumed to have the capacity of changing the environment in which police and citizens interact, as well as the nature and quality of police services. Quality services and a positive image are prerequisites to police effectiveness.

Underlying the cooperative efforts between the police and the community is the assumption that such cooperation rests on, and in turn shapes, the attitudes that citizens hold toward the police (Decker, 1981, p. 80). These attitudes will influence the character of the relationships between citizens and the police and will function to further or hinder cooperation. Clearly, the type and quality of policing strategies and the extent to which they are defined as "community oriented" have become part of the forefront of modern police practice and, as such, are a relevant criminal justice policy issue. The objective of this article is to take a critical look at the concept of community policing and to point out some of its promises and challenges. This preliminary exploration is part of a larger work on international aspects of community policing.

The Framework of Police-Community Cooperation

Recent community policing efforts are expressed by various prevention strategies emphasizing the importance and value of the community for facilitating police work. The community is being viewed as a resource for crime prevention or reduction. The outcome of such strategies is influenced not only through the operation of law enforcement agencies but also by the impact of the community's structure, process, and cooperation among residents, voluntary associations and public agencies (Kramer & Specht, 1983; Latessa & Allen, 1980; Trojanowicz, 1972; U.S. Department of Justice, 1980).

The involvement of the community in crime prevention efforts--as these efforts were initiated by the police--may crystalize community resources (such as human service agencies, volunteer organizations, and youths) which in turn will influence the power bases in the community and create additional

changes as well (Janowitz & Suttles, 1978; Rosenbaum, 1988). Without such community involvement, responsibility for combating crime is left to large public agencies which are not always sensitive to specific community needs.

Community policing emphasizing stronger police-community cooperation can be described by featuring at least three different configurations on a continuum: (a) regular enforcement--no cooperation; (b) public-relations cooperation--token or symbolic cooperation; and (c) grass-roots cooperation--"genuine" or ideal cooperation. In the first configuration, the police focus on enforcement of the law, not on cooperation with or assistance to citizens. Here, police engaging in "by the book" enforcement may encounter community opposition. The community might then activate its own resources, often in other directions than the police's definition of law and order (Nelson, 1967; O'Brien, 1978); in other words, the community may react grudgingly and may become alienated from the police. If, as in the second configuration, the police are concerned only with the improvement of their image, then the result of image-building (essentially through public relations campaigns) that is not accompanied by structural and procedural (operational) change can be found to be disappointing (Evans, 1974; Norris, 1973). In the third configuration, citizens tend to cooperate with the police when their community structure is relatively homogeneous (Cain, 1979) and if they are given the opportunity to influence decisions that might affect the nature of crime in their community (Voth, 1979). Accordingly, police teams in the community will not be effective or appropriate for the community unless their involvement and achievements exceed mere "cosmetic changes" (Evans, 1974). While community homogeneity is not readily given to changes, there is clearly room for citizens to influence law enforcement services and policy decisions. This is also a most desirable feature of citizen participation that has been sought out recently as one solution to citizens' alienation (Sharp, 1978; Wandersman, 1981). Perhaps through citizen participation, initiative of police and citizens alike can contribute to greater cooperation. This is not merely a case of citizens pushing the police to "do something" but an attempt at a more planned and structured approach to achieve viable change.

These three different configurations found separately in the literature were probably best conceptualized in the work of Whitaker (1980) who identified three themes of cooperation which he coined "coproduction":

- 1) Where citizens request assistance from public agents: Here the agency depends on service requests.
- 2) Where citizens provide assistance to public agents: Here citizens initiate or are expected to help an agency to perform its work.
- 3) Where citizens and agents interact to adjust each other's service expectations and actions: Here agents and citizens interact to establish a common understanding of citizens' problems and possible solutions.

Common to the first two themes of coproduction is the particular aspect that has to do with “facilitating” the police in carrying out duties related to their service delivery--namely where citizens provide proper identification, supply requested or volunteered information, use police to mediate disputes, and make distress calls, all creating a climate in which the service recipient is relying on the police as the service provider (of help, direction, or protection) and is cooperating to the extent of enabling a civil exchange. It is in the third theme of coproduction that the promise of community change lies. As this seems to be the theme of “successful--or ideal--cooperation,” it is important to emphasize that cooperation and trust, which of course support the police, depend at least partially on attitudes of citizens; consequently, the following section will examine the relevance of citizens’ attitudes toward the police.

The Framework of Citizens’ Attitudes Toward the Police

Because public support and citizens’ cooperation with the police are partially based on trust, and trust depends on images, attitudes that express those images are considered critical, particularly when negative (O’Brien, 1978). In other words, the images and perceptions that citizens have about “police” will augment or restrict their inclination to cooperate with police officers and will affect the number of offenses that receive police attention (Decker, 1981). Herein lies one hope for the motivation to assist police in their work. Attitudes toward the police include such matters as police efficiency, police toughness, and assistance to citizens, and may reflect potential cooperation--or lack of it--with the police. The importance of attitudes held by citizens--in this case toward the police--is well documented in theory and research that emphasize the nature of attitudes that people develop toward social phenomena (Rusinko, Johnson, & Hornung, 1978). Probably the most important aspect of attitude formation relevant to our discussion is the functionality of attitudes (e.g., instrumental, adjustive, or utilitarian), where people develop positive attitudes toward those objects that are useful in meeting their needs (Katz, 1960; Katz and Stotland, 1959) or in establishing social relationships based on role models (Smith, Bruner, & White, 1956). The assumption is that community attitudes are shaped by personal experience gained through social interaction (Rokeach, 1968). In this context, Scaglione and Condon (1980) found that personal contact, particularly respondents’ perception of the way in which specific officers have treated them personally in previous encounters, is a more significant determinant of general attitudes toward the police than were major SES variables such as race or income (see also Albrecht & Green, 1977; and Decker, 1981). It was also found that people change their attitudes toward social service agencies contingent upon new information (Fitzsimmons &

Ferb, 1977; Fitzsimmons & Osborn, 1968). A somewhat similar pattern of attitude change was found to be one of the key features in social-psychological studies on citizen participation (Bennett, 1989; Wandersman & Giamartino, 1980).

It is not surprising, then, to find that positive attitude formation toward the police may be the first step in resolving challenges that police face, such as high crime rates and lack of cooperation from the community (Chackerian, 1974; Latessa & Allen, 1980; O'Brien, 1978; Rusinko et al. 1978; Trojanowicz, 1972). This is an extremely important point because of dual relevance: (a) Although police (like other social control agencies) may be perceived as an important and necessary function in society, (b) many times the personal encounters may not leave a positive impression on citizens. Thus there is a conflict between the long-range functionality of police for society and the short-range dysfunction of negative encounters. Moreover, if we accept this premise, herein lies another hope: If there is an opportunity created to change attitudes and perceptions, it can be greatly facilitated by planned and publicized community policing efforts carefully carried out.

Problems with Research

The abundance of research on community policing does not necessarily imply either that we know very well what works or what does not or, more specifically, that many of the experimental projects were able to achieve what they claim. A number of threats to the validity and reliability of community policing evaluation studies are pointed out in the literature (see particularly Lurigio & Rosenbaum, 1986).

Construct validity: The extent to which a program has been fully conceptualized and explicated. It allows reliable measurement and is closely linked to some theoretical formulation (i.e., is the program implemented as designed?). Most studies need to have a clearer articulation of program procedure and program outcome.

Internal validity: The extent to which findings of an investigation are (causally) primarily attributable to the intervention being studied and not to other factors. Studies range from very few true experimental designs to mostly pre- or quasi-experimental designs. Since the most commonly used designs are one-group pretest-posttests, they have the limitations of *History* (alternative explanations for changes), *Testing* (reactivity), *Instrumentation* (reliance on crime statistics, unidimensional measures), *Statistical regression* (high or low crime trends may change irrespective of what the program does), *Mortality* (participant attrition), and *Selection* (lack of control over selection of target area, residents, type of program, etc.; biases because of nonrandomness and nonrepresentation).

External validity: Whether the outcome of an evaluation can be generalized across various times, targets, and settings; otherwise the results are program specific.

Statistical conclusion validity limitations or errors in the analysis of data and in measurements of variables. There are few reports beyond percentages and very little reporting of significance levels. There are frequent violations of statistical assumptions, lack of measurement of outcome variable (i.e., displacement of crime), and lack of consideration of time frame involved (long-term impact is not sufficiently considered).

Implications for the Present

Perhaps the biggest drawback of the concept of community policing lies in impreciseness or overreach. It seems to include anything that has to do with the “community.” While the recent surge in policies and strategies regarding community policing emerged as a reaction to a sensed detachment from the community and a desire to “bring the community back in,” the concept covers a wide range of activities, strategies, approaches, and even organizational climates to an extent that blurs what the concept really stands for. It could describe a mini-station, a foot patrol, team policing, neighborhood watch, public relations campaigns, problem area or target policing (neighborhoods or drugs), or it could describe something far less tangible (or strategic) such as an approach to policing that is “community oriented.” It could also simply describe traditional policing; after all, policing is done in communities.

It is unclear whether having one project absolves the police from examining its “community approach” or whether having a general approach removes the need for tangible programs or projects. Therein lie both the promises and the challenges of the concept: What, after all, is community policing? Is it public policing? Is it a strategy? How does it blend with other strategies or other orientations?

The lack of preciseness of the community policing concept raises another set of questions. What is to be changed? Crime rates, fear of crime, attitudes of citizens toward police? Or cooperation with the police? What are acceptable levels of crime? and for what types of crime? How, and by whom, are they defined? What are desired levels of cooperation? For Whom? Even more important, we can assume that the greater the cooperation, the more crime will be reported because of increased trust. This can be self-defeating, as with the increase in known crime trust may be decreasing, resulting in a cycle of structural (or police organizational) changes.

Division of labor is necessary in modern law-enforcement and is another reason why the specificity or generality of the concept needs extensive examination. Who is to do what? Does the rookie or the experienced police

officer do "community work"? While division of labor might seem promising in terms of enabling a unit or agency to carry out its responsibilities, it also includes the potential for intra-unit, inter-unit, and inter-agency ethical dilemmas, tensions, and conflicts. It has implications not only for job and skill expectations but for training, evaluation, promotion, cooperation, and, more generally, police professionalism. With the assigning of one or several officers to carry out "community responsibilities," other officers continue with their traditional policing efforts, and if not enough is done to enhance cooperation between various units tensions rise, stereotypes develop, and conflicts break out.

Finally, greater involvement with the community brings up problems of ethics, corruption, and stagnation. With increased interaction with the community, chances also expand for various discretionary acts for which officers will be accountable. Pressures from neighborhood or block committees or from various criminal as well as noncriminal figures can make officers look the other way.

Implications for the Future

Despite the criticism raised in the previous section, there is no need or intention to throw out the baby with the bath. Depending on how serious community policing efforts are, it can be argued that it is more beneficial to follow this trend than not. Starting with the concluding arguments regarding ethics and corruption, there is no evidence that community-oriented policing will generate greater corruption or violation of ethics than does "traditional" policing. It might be more advantageous to deploy community policing strategies as well as to adopt a "community orientation," as it is generally perceived that the benefits are greater than the risks. It is expected to create a climate of greater accountability for officers and citizens alike. It is expected to generate greater involvement with and sensitivity to community needs and to improve coproduction and effectiveness as well as efficiency of police. More than anything else, it has the promise of reflecting democratic values and allowing formal social control agencies to more finely activate informal social control mechanisms to better tackle deviance and law violation.

One experience that merits much policy examination and scholarly attention is the recent development that is just starting to shape up in Portland, Oregon. This seems to be the first concentrated overall effort at organized community "orientation." The city has developed an elaborate plan to turn the Police Bureau into a "Bureau of Community Policing" within a target date of five years (starting in 1990), signifying a holistic rather than segmented approach to the provision of police services (Portland Police Bureau, 1990). Time will tell whether this will be the direction of the future.

Certainly the Portland police are facing both the promise and the challenge of what might become the latest version of proactive policing.

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