



National Institute of Justice

Research Preview

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Policing Neighborhoods: A Report From Indianapolis

Summary of Research by Stephen D. Mastrofski, Michigan State University; Roger B. Parks, Indiana University; Albert J. Reiss, Jr., Yale University; and Robert E. Worden, University at Albany, State University of New York

Community policing encourages local law enforcement agencies to increase cooperation with the citizens they serve. Criminal justice researchers are currently exploring how this approach affects both police behavior and citizens' responses. This Research Preview reports some findings from a study of policing in two cities—Indianapolis, Indiana, and St. Petersburg, Florida—sponsored by the National Institute of Justice and the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

The study, the Project on Policing Neighborhoods, is based on field observations and interviews with officers and residents. It provides a snapshot of how police and the public relate and of the consequences for neighborhood quality of life in Indianapolis. A similar report on St. Petersburg is being prepared. Additional indepth reports are planned on how officers spend their time, how they handle "problem citizens," the types of assistance police give to the public, and information about supervision and officer performance.

Methodology

In summer 1996, trained observers accompanied patrol officers in 12 of the city's 50 police beats (neighborhoods). Beats were selected to represent variation in social distress (determined by the amount of unemployment, poverty, and female-headed households), which affects service demands and conditions for police. Researchers also interviewed more than 95 percent of patrol officers, 93 percent of their supervisors, and more than 1,200 randomly selected residents of the 12 neighborhoods.

Findings

Allocation of officer time. Researchers found that about 25 percent of officer time was spent in encounters with the public. General patrol accounted for slightly more time, travel to a specific destination consumed 15 percent, problem-directed activities (such as surveillance) and administration each took about 10 percent, and personal time consumed the balance. As with many other human services occupations, contact with service users constituted a limited portion of the typical police work day.

About 31 percent of the time officers spent in face-to-face contact with citizens involved encounters where the central

problem was a crime. However, 23 percent of encounter time involved suspicious situations, nonviolent conflict, or public disorders where a formal law enforcement response was possible.

Indianapolis officers were more proactive than much prior research would indicate. Officer-initiated encounters with the public outnumbered those resulting from a dispatched assignment. On the typical shift, 71 percent of an officer's time was free from assignments from the dispatcher, supervisor, or other officer. Officers spent this time in self-directed activities. On average, 44 percent of officer time for self-directed tasks was available in blocks of at least 60 minutes, suggesting that officers have blocks of time available should they want to engage in special community policing projects.

Police-citizen encounters. The majority of police contacts were not with suspects, but with citizens who sought police assistance or from whom police sought assistance (such as witnesses) or social interaction. Nearly one in five citizens encountered were fearful, angry, or sad at some point during the encounter, a much higher rate than that associated with other problems commonly perceived as typical police work: citizens with weapons or who assault or flee the police.

Researchers found that police and citizens showed high levels of cooperation during encounters. Police fulfilled at least partially the requests of about 8 of every 10 citizens making a request. Almost 9 of every 10 citizens fulfilled or promised to fulfill all or some of the requests officers made.

Officer perceptions. How officers define their role indicates their attachment to traditional policing approaches and their receptiveness to community policing. Indianapolis officers showed some ambivalence about their role: Virtually all officers agreed that assisting citizens is as important as enforcing the law, but more than 80 percent said that enforcing the law is by far a patrol officer's most important responsibility. Such ambivalence need not be resolved when officers have substantial self-directed time, and it might be expected, especially when a police department attempts to change its goals and methods.

Although the data do not show stark absolutes about views of the police role, some tendencies emerged. First, officers and supervisors showed a strong acceptance of dealing directly with disorderly situations, including disputes and nuisances. Officers

were much less accepting of responsibility for handling some factors that may contribute to these problems, such as parents who fail to control their children.

Second, most officers gave high priority to handling calls for service, long a hallmark of traditional, reactive policing. More than 40 percent rated seizing drugs, guns, and other contraband among their two highest priorities. Goals rated among the lowest, by approximately 40 percent of officers, were reducing citizens' fear of crime, reducing public disorder, encouraging public involvement in neighborhood improvements, making arrests, and issuing citations. Except for the last two, the low-priority goals are those associated with community policing. Many officers, then, had yet to be convinced of the reorientation that community policing seeks. But, nearly all officers agreed that a patrol officer should try to learn residents' opinions about significant problems in their neighborhood, indicating substantial support for responsiveness to the community, a trademark of community policing.

Citizen perceptions. Although the officer survey showed near consensus that police should learn residents' concerns about specific neighborhood problems, researchers found that officers serving particular beats tended to rate a range of neighborhood problems as more severe than did residents surveyed. For example, officers in 10 of the 12 beats were much more concerned about the gang presence than were citizens.

About half of citizens reported that police were "excellent" or "good" at working with residents to solve problems, with lower ratings in neighborhoods with higher distress. Older respondents, Caucasians, and members of neighborhood organizations rated police work with citizens more highly.

Residents of moderate-distress neighborhoods were significantly more likely to report that they knew the officers working in their neighborhood than were residents of either low- or high-distress neighborhoods. Younger persons and neighborhood organization members reported knowing police more often than did older residents and nonmembers.

Seventy-seven percent of citizens were very or somewhat satisfied with police services. Satisfaction dropped as problems in neighborhoods increased, but even in high-distress neighborhoods, 70 percent expressed satisfaction. Older residents and neighborhood organization members were slightly more satisfied than younger residents and nonmembers. In neighborhoods with

comparable problems, African-American respondents were slightly more likely to express satisfaction than were Caucasian respondents.

Older respondents reported feeling less safe than did younger citizens, while neighborhood organization members felt safer than nonmembers. In low- and moderate-distress neighborhoods, African Americans felt as safe as Caucasians, and in high-distress neighborhoods Caucasians felt less safe.

Future issues

Indianapolis officers appeared to exercise considerable discretion in determining the kinds of community problems in which they became involved. As community policing implementation proceeds, learning whether officers more fully embrace the role and goals of community policing and whether their use of self-directed time changes accordingly would be useful. Future research could also further explore the relationship between residents' preferences and police perceptions and practices; for example, looking at the extent to which special police-community partnership projects influence residents' evaluations of policing and neighborhood quality of life compared with the impact of police-citizen contacts arising from routine patrol work. The need to explore these relationships increases as police move to organize service delivery around strategic problem solving with citizens rather than incident-based reactive service.

This document is based on research conducted by Dr. Stephen D. Mastrofski, Professor, Michigan State University; Dr. Roger B. Parks, Professor, Indiana University; Dr. Albert J. Reiss, Jr., Professor Emeritus, Yale University; and Dr. Robert E. Worden, Associate Professor, University at Albany, State University of New York. The research was sponsored under NIJ grant number 95-IJ-CX-0071, with funds from the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

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