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Research in Brief

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The New Policing: Confronting Complexity

by Herman Goldstein

Community policing is well on its way to becoming a common term in households across the Nation. That is a satisfying development for many, but causes some anxiety and discomfort for others. What accounts for the mixed reactions?

Under the rubric of community policing, progressive police administrators and interested citizens have been working hard for more than a decade to design and implement a form of policing that better meets the extraordinary demands on the police in the 1990's. Within these circles the term "community policing" has been used to embrace and intricately web together initiatives that have long been advocated for modern-day policing. These efforts have stimulated more productive thought and experimentation than has occurred at any previous time in the history of policing in this country. They have also created a new feeling of excitement and optimism in a field that has desperately needed both. It is understandable, therefore, why the current wave of popular support for community policing is so welcome in many quarters. It gives a tremendous impetus to these new initiatives.

Note: Herman Goldstein is Evjue-Bascom Professor of Law at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. This article is adapted from his address to the 1993 national conference Community Policing for Safe Neighborhoods: Partnerships for the 21st Century, sponsored by the National Institute of Justice, in Arlington, Virginia.

The downside of this new-found popularity is that "community policing" is widely used without any regard for its substance. Political leaders and, unfortunately, many police leaders latch onto the label for the positive images it evokes but do not invest in the concept itself. Some police personnel resist community policing initiatives because of the belief that they constitute an effort to placate an overly demanding and critical segment of the community that is intent on exercising more control over police operations.

Indeed, the popularity of the term has resulted in its being used to encompass practically all innovations in policing, from the most ambitious to the most mundane; from the most carefully thought through to the most casual. The label is being used in ways that increase public expectations of the police and create the impression that community policing will provide an instant solution not only for the problems of crime, disorder, and racial tension, but for many of the other acute problems that plague our urban areas as well.

With such varied meanings and such broad expectations, the use of "community policing" creates enormous problems for those seriously interested in bringing about meaningful change in the American police. Carefully developed initiatives bearing the community policing label, fragile by their very nature, are endangered because superficial programs are so vulnerable to attack.

One reaction to this dilemma is to press for definition and simplification, to seek

agreement on a pure model of community policing. This pressure for simplification is joined by well-intentioned practitioners who, understandably, want to know—in specific detail—what they are supposed to do. *Oversimplification*, however, can be a deadly enemy to progress in policing. The field already suffers because so much in policing is oversimplified.

Crime, violence, and disorder, for example, are simple, convenient terms, but they disguise amorphous, complex problems. Their common and indiscriminate use, especially in defining the responsibilities of the police, places a heavy burden on the police and complicates the police task. The police respond with law enforcement and patrol—equally simple terms commonly used by the public without any awareness of the methods they embrace and their value. If community policing takes its place alongside law enforcement or patrol as just another generic response to a simplistic characterization of the police function, not much will have been gained and the concept will quickly lose its credibility.

Rethinking the police role

The policing of a free, diverse, and vibrant society is an awesome and complex task. The police are called upon to deal with a wide array of quite different behavioral problems, each perplexing in its own way. The police have tremendous power—to deny freedom and to use force, even to take a life. Individual officers exercise enormous discretion in using their authority and in making decisions that affect our

lives. The very quality of life in this country and the equilibrium of our cities depend on the way in which the police function is carried out.

Given the awesome and complex nature of the police function, it follows that designing the arrangements and the organization to carry it out is equally complex. We are now in a period in which more attention is being given to the police function than at any prior time, a period in which we are rethinking, in all of its multiple dimensions, the arrangement for the policing of our society. We should not, therefore, lose patience because we have not yet come up with the perfect model; we should not get stalled trying to simplify change just to give uniform meaning to a single, catchy, and politically attractive term. We need to open up explorations rather than close them down. We need to better understand the complicated rather than search for the simple.

Some of the most common changes associated with community policing are already being implemented; for example, the permanent assignment of officers to specific beats with a mandate to get to know and relate to the community. There is now growing and persuasive support for decentralization, permanent assignments, and the development of "partnerships" between the police and the community. But these changes represent only a fragment of the larger picture.

Policing in the United States is much like a large, intricate, complex apparatus with many parts. Change of any one part requires changes in many others and in the way the parts fit and work together. For example, altering the way officers are assigned and how they patrol may be easy. But to gain full value from such changes, and to sustain them, changes are also necessary in the organization and leadership of the police department—in its staffing, supervision, training, and recruitment; and in its internal working environment. Thus, a change in direction requires more than tinkering. It requires, if it is to be effective, simultaneous changes in many areas affecting the enterprise. This, in turn, requires careful planning and coordination. And perhaps most important, it requires time, patience, and learning from experience.

Moreover, to succeed in improving policing, we need to move beyond the exclusive focus on the police *agency*. There is an urgent need to alter the public's expectations of the police. And we need to revise the fundamental provisions that we as a society make for carrying out the police function. For example:

- Refine the authority granted the police (curtail it in some areas and expand it in others).
- Recognize the discretion exercised by the police and provide a means for its review and control.

- Provide the police with the resources that will enable them to get their job done.

We need, in other words, without compromising our commitment to democratic values, to bring expectations and capacity more into harmony so that a job increasingly labeled as "impossible" can be carried out.

The nature of change

To illustrate, in some detail, the complexity of change in policing, it is helpful to examine five spheres in which change is now occurring. What types of issues arise? And what is the interrelationship and interdependence among the factors involved in these changes?

1. Refining the police function and public expectations

The new forms of policing expand the police function from crime fighting, without any abdication of that role, to include maintaining order, dealing with quality-of-life offenses, and fixing the "broken windows"—all now recognized as being much more important than previously believed. The police have become more proactive, committed to preventing incidents rather than simply *reacting* to them. These shifts in emphasis appear to have gained widespread support.

But we need to be aware of the avalanche of business that this expansion of the police function invites lest it constitute a serious self-inflicted wound. The volume and nature of the miscellaneous tasks that accrue to the police are many. Cutbacks in other government services only add to their

number. In areas that are starved for social services, the slightest improvement in police response increases the demand on the police. As water seeks its own level, the vast array of problems that surface in a large urban area inevitably find their way to the agency most willing to accept them.

For example, consider the officer assigned to a specific neighborhood with a broad mandate to improve service. Within a very short period of time, that officer will be overwhelmed by the need for services that—despite the greatest creativity and resourcefulness—far exceeds his or her capacity to deliver.

Very often the police *can* do more to satisfy citizen needs. They can identify problems and take actions that result in mitigating or solving them when they are given the time and license to do so. But in the larger scheme of things the need to reduce public expectations is every bit as important as the need to broaden the police function—not simply to make limited resources fit the demand, but for more complex reasons. Many of the most troublesome aspects of policing stem from the pressure that has been exerted on the police to appear omnipotent, to do more than they are authorized, trained, and equipped to do.



Photo by Eugene E. Hebert, NJ

"...what may work for one will not work for the other... That is the beginning of wisdom in policing: One size clearly does not fit all." —Professor Herman Goldstein

Police tend to like challenges. But the challenge to fill needs, to live up to expectations, can lead to the taking of shortcuts, the stretching of authority and, as a consequence, the potential for abuse of that authority. It is demoralizing to the thoughtful, dedicated officer to create the expectation that he or she can do more than take the edge off some of the more intractable problems that the police confront.

The new policing seeks to make the police job more achievable by realigning what the police do and do not do by giving higher priority to some tasks and lower priority to others, by reducing public expectations and leveling with the public about police capacity, by engaging the public in taking steps to help themselves, and by connecting with other agencies and the private sector in ways that ensure that citizens referred to them will be helped. There is a need to invest much more, in our individual communities, in working through the questions that arise in trying to achieve this better alignment.

2. Getting involved in the substance of policing

A common theme in initiatives under the community policing umbrella is the emphasis on improving relationships with the citizenry. Such improvement is vital in order to reduce tensions, develop mutual trust, promote the free exchange of information, and acquaint officers with the culture and lifestyle of those being policed.

Improved relationships are important. They would constitute a major advance in some cities. But many would argue that they merely lay a groundwork and create an environment in which to strive for more. When citizens ask if community policing works, they are not so much interested in knowing if the community likes the police or if the police are getting along with the community. Rather, they usually want to know if the community policing initiative has had an impact on the problems of concern to them: their fear of using the streets, the abandoned cars in the neighborhood, the gang that has been intimidating them. If the initiatives that have been taken do not go beyond improving relationships, there is a risk that community policing will become just another means by which police operate without

having a significant, demonstrable impact on the problems the police are expected to handle.

This tendency in policing to become preoccupied with means over ends is obviously not new. It was this concern that gave rise to the work on problem-oriented policing. The police must give more substance to community policing by getting more involved in analyzing and responding to the specific problems citizens bring to their attention. This calls for a much heavier investment by the police in understanding the varied pieces of their business, just as the medical field invests in understanding different diseases. It means that police, more than anyone else, should have a detailed understanding of such varied problems as homicides involving teenage victims, drive-by shootings, and carjackings. And it means that a beat officer should have in-depth knowledge about the corner drug house, the rowdy teenage gang that assembles at the convenience store on Friday night, and the panhandler who harasses passersby on a given street corner. Analyzing each of these quite different problems in depth leads to the realization that what may work for one will not work for the other, that each may require a different combination of different responses. That is the beginning of wisdom in policing: One size clearly does not fit all.

Problem-solving is being integrated into community policing initiatives in many jurisdictions. It dominates the commitment to change in some jurisdictions. Conference and training sessions for police have, with increased frequency, focused on such problems as the homeless, family violence, high-risk youth, child abuse, and school violence.

More of the momentum associated with community policing must be focused on these and similar problems. Smarter policing in this country requires a sustained effort within policing to research substantive problems, to make use of the mass of information and data on specific problems accumulated by individual police agencies, to experiment with different alternative responses, to evaluate these efforts, and to share the results of these evaluations with police across the Nation. It would be useful to do more to reorient the work of research and development units in police

departments, and to entice some of the best minds in the field of criminology and related specialties to assist in these efforts. The police should not only make greater use of research done by others; they should themselves be engaged in research.

3. Rethinking the relationship between the police and the criminal justice system

Buried in all of the rhetoric relating to community policing is the fact that, with little notice and in subtle ways, the longstanding relationship between the police and the criminal justice system is being redefined. This is a radical change, but it is given scant attention in the literature on community policing. And the full consequences of the changes—and their relationship to some of the developments most commonly associated with community policing—have not been adequately explored.

The enforcement of criminal law is inherent in the police role. The great emphasis on enforcement affects the shape of their organizations, the attitudes and priorities of their personnel, and their relationship with the community. Significantly, police officers are referred to as "law enforcement officers." The felt need for objectivity and neutrality in law enforcement often results in the police being characterized as having no discretion. And the commitment to enforcement encourages the police to act in ways designed to inflate the public's impression of their capacity to enforce the law in the hope that their image alone will reduce crime and disorder.

Advanced forms of community policing reject many of the characteristics stemming from the emphasis on enforcement. A neighborhood police officer, for example, is expected to have a much broader interest than simply enforcing the criminal law, to exhaust a wide range of alternatives before resorting to arrest for minor offenses, to exercise broad discretion, and to depend more on resourcefulness, persuasion, or cajoling than on coercion, image, or bluff.

Reconciling these different perspectives has always been difficult. Some would even argue the two postures are incompatible. Simplistically, they are often



*A large crowd and the media were present for Professor Herman Goldstein's keynote address at NJI's conference, **Community Policing for Safe Neighborhoods: Partnerships for the 21st Century**.*

distinguished as the "hard" and "soft" approaches in policing. But as a result of a sequence of developments in the past decade the difference between the two approaches has been diminished.

What has happened? So long as the police were intricately intertwined with the criminal justice system, they came to depend more heavily on the system. Thus, as violence and, especially, crimes associated with drugs increased, the police made more and more arrests of serious offenders. And to deal with disorder on the streets they arrested thousands of minor offenders as well, often stretching their authority somewhat (as police are pressured to do) in order to restore order. Predictably, the criminal justice systems in most large urban areas, and many smaller ones as well, have been overwhelmed to the point that it is no longer possible for the system to accept some serious offenders, let alone minor offenders.

The consequences of recognizing that the capacity of the criminal justice system has limits are more far-reaching than is commonly recognized. Police can no longer use arrest, as they so freely did in the past, to deal with a wide variety of ambiguous situations. Moreover, the aura of authority on which the police have so heavily depended for getting so much of their job done, rooted in the capacity to arrest, has been greatly diminished. Police officers today simply do not appear as powerful and threatening to those who most frequently come in contact with them because they can no longer use the criminal justice system as they once did.

What does this mean for some of the central themes under the community policing umbrella? It means that there are new, pragmatic reasons for searching intensively for alternatives to the criminal justice system as the way in which to get the police job done.

It also means that there is now an added incentive to cultivate positive relationships with the community. The police need to replace the amorphous authority that they previously derived from the criminal justice system and on which they depended so heavily in the past. What better way to do this than arm themselves with what Robert Peel characterized in 1829 as that most powerful form of authority, the "public approval of their existence, actions, and behavior."

The congested state of affairs in the criminal justice system means, too, that the police must conserve their use of that system for those situations in which it is most appropriate and potentially most effective. This latter need should lead the police and others committed to community policing to join Attorney General Janet Reno in speaking out for a more sensible national criminal justice policy that curbs the indiscriminate overuse of a system that will, if not checked, draw scarce funds away from the police and away from preventive programs where those funds can do more good.

4. Searching for alternatives

The diversification of policing—the move from primary dependence on the criminal law to the use of a wide range of different responses—is among the most significant changes under the community policing umbrella. It enables the police to move away from having to "use a hammer (the criminal justice system) to catch a fly;" it enables them to fine-tune their responses. It gives them a range of options (or tools) that in number and variety come closer to matching the number and variety of problems they are expected to handle. These may include informal, common sense responses used in the past but never formally authorized.

The primary and most immediate objective in authorizing the police to use a greater range of alternatives is to improve police effectiveness. Quite simply, mediating a dispute, abating a nuisance, or arranging to have some physical barrier removed—without resorting to arrest—may be the best way to solve a problem.

But there are additional benefits in giving police officers a larger repertoire of responses. Currently, for example, one of the greatest impediments to improvement in policing is the strength of the police

subculture. That subculture draws much of its strength from a secret shared among police: that they are compelled to bend the law and take shortcuts in order to get their job done. Providing the police with legitimate, clear-cut means to carry out their functions enables them to operate more honestly and openly and, therefore, has the potential for reducing the strength and, as a consequence, the negative influence of the police subculture.

The diversification of options is also responsive to one of the many complexities in the staffing of police agencies. It recognizes, forthrightly, the important role of the individual police officer as a decision-maker—a role the officer has always had but one that has rarely been acknowledged. Acknowledging and providing alternatives contribute toward redefining the job of a police officer by placing a value on thinking, on creativity, and on decisionmaking. It credits the officer with having the ability to analyze incidents and problems and gives the officer the freedom to choose among various appropriate responses.

Changing to a system in which so much responsibility is invested in the lowest level employee, one who already operates with much independence on the streets, will not occur quickly or easily. And absent sufficient preparation, the results may be troublesome. This is especially so if officers, in their enthusiasm, blend together community support and their desire to please the community to justify using methods that are either illegal or improper. And implementation in a department that has a record of abuse or corruption is obviously much more problematic. Those concerned about control, however, must recognize that the controls on which we currently depend are much less effective than they are often thought to be. Preparations for the empowerment of officers requires changes in recruitment standards and training, establishing guidelines for the exercise of discretion, and inculcating values in officers that, in the absence of specific directions, guides their decision-making. Meeting these needs in turn connects with the fifth and final dimension of change.

5. Changing the working environment in a police agency

If new forms of policing are to take hold, the working environment within police

agencies must change. Much has been written about new management styles supportive of community policing. But with a few remarkable exceptions relatively little has actually been achieved. And where modest changes have been made they are often lost when a change in administration occurs or when the handling of a single incident brings embarrassment, resulting in a reversion to the old style of control.

“Working environment” means simply the atmosphere and expectations that superiors set in relating to their subordinates. In a tradition-bound department, managers, supported by voluminous, detailed rules, tend to exercise a tight, paramilitary, top-down form of control—perhaps reflecting the way in which they have historically sought to achieve control in the community.

The initiatives associated with community policing cannot survive in a police agency managed in traditional ways. If changes are not made, the agency sets itself up for failure. Officers will not be creative and will not take initiatives if a high value continues to be placed on conformity. They will not be thoughtful if they are required to adhere to regulations that are thoughtless. And they will not aspire to act as mature, responsible adults if their superiors treat them as immature children.

But properly trained and motivated officers, given the freedom to make decisions and act independently, will respond with enthusiasm. They will grasp the concept, appreciate its many dimensions, and skillfully fill their new roles. These officers will solve problems, motivate citizens to join together to do things for themselves, and create a feeling of security and goodwill. Equally important, the officers will find their work demanding but very satisfying. In rank and file officers, there exists an enormous supply of talent, energy, and commitment that, under quality leadership, could rapidly transform American policing.

The major impediment to tapping this wellspring has been a failure to engage and elicit a commitment from those having management and supervisory responsibilities. It is disheartening to witness a meeting of the senior staff of a police agency in which those in attendance are disconnected and often openly hostile to changes initiated by the chief executive

and supported by a substantial proportion of the rank and file. It is equally disheartening to talk with police officers on the street and officers of lower supervisory rank who cite their *superior officer* as their major problem, rather than the complexity of their job.

Because the problem is of such magnitude, perhaps some bold—even radical—steps by legislative bodies and municipal chief executives may be necessary. Perhaps early retirement should be made more attractive for police executives who resist change. Perhaps consideration should be given to proposals recently made in England that call for the elimination of unnecessary ranks, and for making continuation in rank conditional on periodic review.

But before one can expect support for such measures, the public will need to be satisfied that police executives have exhausted whatever means are available to them for turning the situation around. When one looks at what has been done, it is troubling to find that a department’s investment in the reorientation of management and supervisory personnel often consisted of no more than “a day at the academy”—and sometimes not even that. How much of the frustration in eliciting support from management and supervision stems from the fact that agencies have simply not invested enough in engaging senior officers, in explaining why change is necessary, and in giving these supervisors and managers the freedom required for them to act in their new role.

Some efforts to deal with the problem have been encouraging. The adoption of “Total Quality Management” in policing has demonstrated very positive results and holds much promise. It ought to be encouraged. An important lesson can be learned from experiences with TQM. Training to support changes of the magnitude now being advocated in policing requires more than a one-shot effort consisting of a few classroom lectures. It requires a substantial commitment of time in different settings spread over a long period, a special curriculum, the best facilitators, and the development of problems, case studies, and exercises that engage the participants. It requires the development of teamwork in which subordinates contribute as much as superiors. And it requires that the major dimension of the training take the form of

conscious change in the day-to-day interaction of personnel—not in a training setting, but on the job.

Conclusion

Dwelling on complexity is risky, for it can be overwhelming and intimidating. It is difficult. It turns many people off. But for those who get involved, the results can be very rewarding.

There have been extraordinary accomplishments in policing in the past two decades by police agencies that have taken on some of these difficult tasks. There is an enormous reservoir of ability and commitment in police agencies, especially among rank and file officers, and a willingness on the part of individual citizens and community groups at the grass roots level to engage with the police and sup-

port change. Viewed collectively, these achievements should be a source of optimism and confidence. By building on past progress and capitalizing on current momentum, change that is deeper and more lasting can be achieved.

But there is an even more compelling, overriding incentive to struggle with these complexities. We are being challenged today to commit ourselves anew to our unique character as a democracy, to the high value we as a nation place on diversity, ensuring equality, protecting individual rights, and guaranteeing that all citizens can move about freely and enjoy tranquil lives. The social problems that threaten the character of the Nation are increasing, not decreasing. It will take major changes—apart from those in the police—to reduce these problems. In this turbulent period it is more important than

ever that we have a police capacity that is sensitive, effective, and responsive to the country's unique needs, and that, above all else, is committed to protecting and extending democratic values. That is a high calling indeed.

Findings and conclusions of the research reported here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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