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Reflections on Community-Oriented Policing

By
ROBERT BOBINSKY

On the east side of Bensenville, Illinois, sits an island community made up of over 250 single-family residences and a complex containing more than 200 closely spaced townhouses. This "community within a community" is separated from the mainstream of the village by more than the railroad tracks and international airport that border it on three sides.

A psychological barrier also exists that isolates the residents of this community from those of the village at large. Much of the gang activity in the village is centered in the townhouse complex. Other problems stem from the fact that a majority of the residents in the complex are recent or illegal immigrants, of either Hispanic or East Indian origin. Most harbor fears and distrust toward law enforcement, held over from experiences in their native countries. The language barrier between these residents and employees of the village's public service agencies also led to a lack of understanding regarding the problems in the area. Over the years, this lack of communication and cooperation gave way to an overall deterioration in the physical state of the neighborhood.

In March 1991, several residents concerned with the declining condition of the area enlisted the



cooperation of the police chief and the department's DARE officer to establish a Neighborhood Watch. The first sparsely attended meetings of this group produced small, but important, results. Police response times to the area improved, as did

the sense of cooperation between other village agencies and the residents of the area.

Then, in October 1991, an incident occurred that proved to be a catalyst for far greater change. A 15-year-old resident with ties to gang

activity was shot and killed while standing in front of his home. At the next Neighborhood Watch meeting, over 300 residents and several village officials agreed that the quality of services for the area—policing among them—required immediate reform.

The police department responded by forming a two-officer undercover tactical team, which focused its efforts on disrupting gang and criminal activity in the island community. Then, the chief of police approached me with another idea for improving the quality of life in the troubled area. The chief's proposal called for implementing an aggressive Community-oriented Policing (COP) Program in the townhouse complex. It would be an experiment that could lead to profound changes in the residents' attitudes toward the police.

Not fully understanding the principles of community-oriented policing, I initially declined my

chief's offer to participate in Bensenville's COP program. My instincts told me that the approach was too much like social work and would no longer involve any real police work. Not one to take "no" for an answer, the chief convinced me to read several articles and pamphlets about community-oriented policing before refusing the position outright. This brief investment of time helped me to put the somewhat abstract concept of community policing into a practical perspective.

The more I read, the more I came to realize that community-oriented policing represents the approach law enforcement must take in order to meet the changing needs of communities. This policing concept also completely changed the way I viewed the role of law enforcement in society.

Traditional Policing

Historically, local law enforcement in the 1930s and 1940s was

characterized by the "beat cop," who knew every resident and business owner in an assigned area. Likewise, this officer became aware almost immediately when a crime occurred and generally found out quickly from members of the community who committed it. This timely apportionment of justice helped to create a strong bond between members of the community and the officers who patrolled their districts.

However, this policing model harbored significant drawbacks. Officers often gained appointments through corrupt political deals, were poorly trained, and rarely displayed a professional appearance or demeanor.

As a result, the 1960s and 1970s saw the dawn of the "professional policing model." These new officers used the most up-to-date technology—such as high-speed cruisers, forensic laboratories, mobile radios, and 911 emergency systems—to serve the sprawling suburban environment that came to characterize much of the American landscape. Considering the vast areas covered by a limited number of officers, response times were exceptionally quick. Such areas as recruiting practices, training, and professionalism were vastly improved.

But the professional policing model possessed its own inherent shortcomings. Officers became less a part of the communities they served. In fact, they were intentionally placed "outside" of the community as a reaction to the potential for corruption that existed in prior policing models. And, even though response times were exceptional, calls for police service still brought



Officer Bobinsky serves in the Bensenville, Illinois, Police Department.

“By allowing one area to deteriorate, cycles of poverty and crime intensify, creating a situation even more difficult to address in the future.”

officers to the scene *after* a crime had been committed. This "incident-oriented" policing model placed an impressive array of resources at officers' disposal to locate offenders, but made little attempt to reduce actual crime numbers.

Bringing Policing Back to the Community

Community-oriented policing combines the familiarity, trust, and sense of ownership characterized by the "beat cop" with the professionalism and expertise of the professional policing model. Officers working in this mode conduct their patrols from a problem-oriented, rather than incident-oriented, perspective. Accordingly, the focus becomes preventive—rather than reactive—police work.

Officers involved in community-oriented policing have access to residents on a personal level, which helps to build a better relationship between the community and the police department. Residents see the police as more than just anonymous blue suits driving down the street in patrol cars. The community is more involved with the officers, and in turn, becomes the eyes and ears of the department in the neighborhood.

Overcoming Obstacles

Officers involved in community-oriented policing programs need to foster a good working relationship with other municipal agencies. Cooperation is essential, not only in the planning and implementation stages but also in the daily operation of any satellite office. In addition, because these municipal officials possess experience in

securing funds, hiring new employees, and managing personnel, they can be a valuable resource when expanding a program. When it comes to a community-oriented approach, having the municipality's management on your side can mean the difference between an initiative just getting by and truly succeeding.

Still, incorporating community-oriented policing into the daily operations of the police department

Community-oriented policing does not transform police officers into social workers.

may breed some problems from different quarters. As I had expected, the expenditure of village funds into an area historically separated from the rest of the community raised some eyebrows. Often, I found myself having to respond to the question, "Why is *our* money going to *that* area?"

Fortunately, there were many answers to that question. Residents who asked it needed to be reminded that if one area of town is allowed to become a "slum," the entire village is adversely affected. Gangs would eventually break out of their "home turf" and infest other residential and business areas. By allowing one

area to deteriorate, cycles of poverty and crime intensify, creating a situation even more difficult to address in the future.

In contrast, reduced crime rates in the target area allow the police department to devote more resources to other parts of the community. In addition, by raising the standards of the townhouse complex, property values increase, yielding additional tax revenues for the village.

While I expected a degree of community skepticism regarding the ambitious program, the negative sentiments expressed by some of my fellow officers represented a more formidable obstacle. These comments, whether directed to one another or to local residents, were difficult to deal with, both on a personal and professional level. Still, many officers expressed great interest in the program, and through education and encouragement to participate, the few that publicly voiced their doubts eventually assisted in the overall success of the effort.

A Different Beat

The Police-Neighborhood Resource Center (PNRC) serves as the centerpiece of the COP program in Bensenville. Using Federal, State, and county grants, as well as local tax revenues, the village purchased a townhouse in the target area and renovated it into a satellite police and village office.

I now work at the Police-Neighborhood Resource Center. However, my job description has not changed—I am still a uniformed police officer. My beat is much smaller than other officers in the patrol division, which has its distinct advantages.

For example, I now know many of the residents on a personal level. More importantly, the relationship between the police department and the neighborhood has greatly improved. In addition to reporting known and suspected criminal activity to me, the residents also seek my assistance when dealing with other village agencies. Often, residents stop me in the street as I walk by their homes and ask who they can call to resolve specific problems. Partly as a result, sanitation conditions and problems associated with overcrowding have shown signs of improvement. Additionally, in the course of my duties, I have returned lost children to their homes, solved parking problems, and assisted other officers during emergency calls.

Despite my intolerance toward gangs in general, local gang members display a grudging respect for me and my position. They appreciate that I treat each person on an individual basis and do not view them merely as gang members. They also realize that I have a job to do, and that if I treat them with respect, I demand the same treatment in return. I am rarely disappointed.

For example, during my first week at the PNRC, several gang members advised me that a member

of a rival gang had driven into the area in a car he claimed to have stolen. The gang members brought me directly to the vehicle, and a subsequent computer check

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revealed that the car had indeed been reported stolen only 12 hours earlier. With information given to me by these gang members, I recovered a stolen automobile and arrested the offender.

In fact, after just a few months of working in the PNRC, I observed a distinct swing in the attitude of the gang members. Many actually stop by my office, either to just sit and talk or, more often, to relate information regarding suspicious or illegal activity in and around the village. Recently, on two separate occasions, members of rival gangs damaged a truck belonging to a local gang member. Instead of retaliating, the victim called the police station

and requested that I take the report. In both cases, the offenders were identified and arrested. Through such incidents, the gang members have come to realize that I am a police officer who they can trust to take any criminal act seriously, no matter who the victim is.

Additional Benefits

Aside from enhancing the relationship between the police department and area residents, the community-oriented approach produced additional benefits. Because of the assistance I try to provide to tenants, I now have a better line of communication with

village and county officials. If residents advise me of an inordinate number of people living in a townhome, for example, I can contact the village zoning officer, who will immediately make inspections of the house for safety, fire, and ordinance violations. Slowly, the combined efforts of several government agencies are driving criminal slumlords—who once preyed on low-income residents—from the area.

From the outset, various village agencies coordinated their efforts to ensure the most efficient use of resources. The Director of Community Services persuaded the different village taxing entities to cooperate in making revenues available. She also coordinated an effort to provide public library programs and job placement services at the PNRC. In addition, the school district established an after-school tutoring program at the site.

The Police-Neighborhood Resource Center is also being used for more programs than originally anticipated. The Neighborhood Watch uses the center for its meetings, as do two local Girl Scout troops. A local community college offers an "English-as-a-Second-Language" course at the center, and the local public library created a satellite library at the site, using its own grants to purchase books.

Preliminary Results

Despite the visible signs of improvement in the island community, I found myself disappointed by the initial statistical results. A comparison of the rate of calls for police service showed a dramatic increase during the first 2 months of the PNRC's operation. However, at face value, these figures proved somewhat deceptive. The rate of crime did not increase, only the rate of calls to the police for service. Rather than indicating a worsening situation, the initial rise in the number of calls revealed a new willingness on the part of residents to trust the police.

In subsequent months, the rate of calls showed a steady decline. More importantly, the rate of criminal activity also fell. When compared to 1991 figures, totals for 1992 revealed an overall lower rate of calls for service and crime throughout the target area.

This reinforces the need for departments to make long-term commitments to community-oriented policing. During the early stages, calls for police service may indeed increase. However, administrators should not view this as a negative

outcome. Increased calls for service generally reveal positive changes in the mindset of area residents.

Other COP Programs

From my experiences with Bensenville's Community-oriented Policing Program, I have become familiar with some of the COP initiatives being employed in other police departments throughout the Nation. Though they share similarities, none are—or should be—identical. Likewise, when adopting a COP

A more involved community translates into a community more willing to cooperate with its police department.

program, each police department should look at the local needs of each neighborhood or target community. Not every situation is alike, and there is virtually an infinite number of programs from which to choose.

For example, in Elgin, Illinois, the Resident Officer Program of Elgin (ROPE) actually houses police officers and their families in target areas. Officers in this program conduct their police business from a satellite office.

Aurora, Illinois, employs a mobile police trailer that can be moved

from community to community, staying until the target areas have been improved. Officers can also position the trailer in the middle of a street to act as a checkpoint for vehicles and individuals entering or leaving an area.

This diversity of programs underscores one of the strengths of community-oriented policing. Departments can tailor programs to meet the unique needs of communities. And, because officers assume more personal responsibility for the areas they patrol, their input adds imaginative details to the programs.

Conclusion

Like many officers, I approached community policing very cautiously—even skeptically. I did not wish to surrender my role as a law enforcement officer only to become a "social worker with a badge." However, my experiences with the Police-Neighborhood Resource Center changed my previously held perception.

Community-oriented policing does not transform police officers into social workers. It does, however, empower officers to connect individuals with problems to agencies that can help them. COP does involve a few extra minutes handling each call, but this is time well-spent. Most importantly, community-oriented policing recognizes the value of the police and the community working together to reduce crime. A more involved community translates into a community more willing to cooperate with its police department. In the words of my chief, such a relationship is a "win-win situation." ♦