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Beyond Community Policing: Community Justice

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A core theme of the still-evolving community policing movement is that governmental agencies alone cannot adequately serve the public without the involvement of the public itself. Despite ongoing debate on some matters, community policing is here to stay and to mature. With a partnership in place, crime calls into play the strength of the people and government working together to solve the problem.

The rest of the criminal justice system is beginning to apply lessons from the community policing experience. A movement known as community (or restorative) justice - referred to here as community justice - is receiving a lot of attention across the U.S. Like community policing, it views the issues of crime and disorder in a broader context, and strives to find a solution that leaves the community stronger and more able to deal with problems in the future.

Community justice differs from the traditional model on both the process and the desired outcome. The process emphasizes full involvement of the key involved parties (victim and offender) and understanding of the underlying issues and effects of the crime. This addresses the history of conflict that is sometimes evident and relevant, but excluded from official court processes as inadmissible relating to a specific charge. It also allows the victim to get questions answered (such as "why was I selected?"); to express outrage and explain the impact of the crime (offenders often lack empathy or understanding of the



effect of their actions); and to work out the details of the restitution agreement (research indicates payment is more quickly and fully forthcoming when the parties work it out). Furthermore, fear of re-victimization is substantially reduced when a face to face dialogue is held.

There are secondary victims of crimes as well, notably the community which has been disrupted. Today's justice system is oriented toward the offender - either punishing or treating - while the victim and community sit on the sideline. Community justice would connect the offender and the sanction to the crime, requiring the criminal to right the wrong. For nonviolent offenders, relevant community service is a visible way to make amends. Our most victimized communities have the greatest need of clean up, repair, and other activities to improve the appearance, livability and order-maintenance of the neighborhood. Holding offenders accountable in this fashion can provide added value to the community while allowing the perpetrator to truly feel he/she has paid the debt to society.

Community justice is not appropriate for all cases - any more than community policing will result in the demise of SWAT teams. But it does offer a better way to deal with many cases while finding legitimate and constructive roles for community and justice agencies. Police officials can reach up the criminal justice processing ladder to help prosecutors, judiciary and corrections develop less formal and more victim-friendly practices



There is evidence from public surveys that citizens favor this approach. While violent predators must be locked up for a long time, they recognize that prison is too costly to use for all offenders, and that too often probation is meaningless. For jailed offenders, their obligation to repay should not be forgotten; the community can become involved upon reentry after incarceration. The many eyes can aid supervision for those who require it; the community assistance provided can aid offender reintegration for those who merit support.

While any police department can develop its own adaptation of these principles, there are some models with a track record to consider. Perhaps best known is the victim-offender mediation approach, used mostly by nonprofit organizations in hundreds of communities across the U.S. A trained mediator (often a volunteer) discusses the case first with the victim, then the offender. If both are willing, a session is held in a convenient location. The impact of the crime and reasons for its occurrence are discussed and an appropriate resolution achieved. The adversarial approach is not necessary for all cases, and the community justice approach would provide another tool to apply as needed.

There is evidence that this works. Harrisburg (Pennsylvania) Police Department noted that they were expending a good deal of police time involved with repeat visits to the same address, and that even with arrest the problems often did not abate. They tried randomly assigning every other call from these [problem addresses] to a citizen dispute settlement program, and the results were impressive. After six months, the control group continued to have call backs at the same rate, while the cases referred to the dispute settlement program



dropped by over 60%. The dollar value saved in police time totaled in the tens of thousands; more importantly, the underlying problems were resolved and perhaps escalating violence averted.

Another model that began in New Zealand is known as Family Group Conferencing. Modeled after an indigenous Maori justice approach and adapted by some Australian police departments, this group victim-offender mediation includes the family of the victim and the offender. One Australian site noted a 27% drop in juvenile crime after adopting this approach. Several American cities are trying this promising model, including Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

We know that much crime and disorder emanate from the family and the community, and that offenders are sanctioned there or return there after incarceration. The social controls and support offered by family and community are better able than the government to affect behavior, and it is logical for justice agencies to develop stronger ties to those entities.

Community policing advocates can help reach toward this ideal by enjoining other agencies to involve victims and community in the endeavor to insure domestic tranquility. Community justice offers hope for a better way to strive toward that ideal.

Thomas J. Quinn is a Visiting Fellow at the National Institute of Justice, supported by grant 95-IJ-CX-0016. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of Justice.

