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Chicago Community Policing

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This chapter describes how the general principles underlying community policing programs around the country were implemented in one city, Chicago. Chicago's initiative began in 1993, when the city inaugurated an experimental program in five of its 25 police districts. Known as CAPS (for Chicago's Alternative Policing Strategy), it became a citywide program in 1995, after some of the kinks were worked out of the plan. Another chapter of this Encyclopedia describes community policing in general, but as the many examples given there demonstrate, what cities actually do when they implement community policing varies a great deal. In some places it is in the hands of special teams run from police headquarters, while in others it involves transforming the entire department. Under the heading "community policing" officers patrol on foot and bicycles, and departments open small neighborhood storefront offices, conduct surveys to measure community satisfaction, and work with municipal agencies to enforce health and safety regulations.

However, community policing is not a set of specific projects. Underneath these tactics lies a deeper organizational strategy involving changing decision-making processes in a way that leaves setting many priorities and the means for achieving them in the hands of residents and the police who serve in their area. As a result, community policing projects should look different in different cities, and even in different neighborhoods, because crime and the resources that police and the community can bring to bear on it differ from place to place. Underlying these seemingly different programs are three core strategic elements: community engagement, decentralization, and problem solving. These three elements are very interrelated, and departments that shortchange even one of them will not field a very effective program. Police in Chicago did establish an effective program, especially for a large and unwieldy city, and this chapter describes what they did to turn each of these elements of community policing into reality.

The first common feature of departments adopting this new model of policing is community engagement. Community policing calls for them to develop mechanisms for constructively sharing information with the public, and for accommodating citizen input in setting priorities and evaluating whether or not they have been successful in addressing local concerns. To accomplish this, departments hold community meetings, form advisory committees, and survey the public in order to identify their priorities. In some places police share information with residents through educational programs or by enrolling them in citizen police academies that give them in-depth knowledge of law enforcement. Engagement usually extends to involving the public in some way in efforts to enhance community safety. Residents are certainly asked to assist the police by reporting crimes promptly when they occur and cooperating as witnesses, but community policing also promises to strengthen the capacity of communities to fight and prevent crime on their own. Residents may get involved in the coordinated or collaborative crime prevention projects, and — but this is less common because of the legal liabilities it threatens if someone gets hurt — participate in officially sanctioned neighborhood patrol groups. Even where these are old ideas, moving them to center stage as part of a larger strategic plan can showcase the commitment of police departments to resident involvement.

In Chicago's plan, beat community meetings are the most important mechanism for building and sustaining close relationships between police and the public. Beats are the department's smallest administrative unit, and each month an average of 6,700 residents attend about 250 evening beat community meetings. They are held in church social halls, park district buildings, hospital cafeterias, condominium party rooms, and other venues located in the beats. Residents meet with an average of five police officers, most of whom regularly patrol in the area. Officers working on other shifts are paid overtime to attend, to ensure that day watch and late-night problems are also discussed. Officers serving in specialized units, such as gang officers or detectives, are often present as well, along with a representative of the police district's neighborhood relations unit. Meetings are sometimes attended by representatives of the city's service departments and area community organizations, and the local aldermen's staff.

The meetings are to provide a forum for exchanging information and a venue for identifying, analyzing and prioritizing problems in an area. Local crime maps, "Top Ten" lists of the most frequent crimes, and other informational materials are distributed at the meetings. There is always a discussion of what has happened with regard to issues raised at the last meeting, and this provides a bit of community oversight of police activity. Chicagoans are not shy, and an observational study found that criticism of the police was voiced at about half the meetings. The new business segments of the meetings focus on identifying new issues and debating whether they are general problems or just the concern of one resident. Beat meetings are also a very convenient place to distribute announcements about upcoming community events, circulate petitions, and call for volunteers to participate in action projects. Importantly, they also provide occasions for residents and police who work in the area and will likely answer their calls to meet face-to-face and get acquainted.

The city invests a great deal of energy in turning residents out for the monthly meetings. District officers distribute flyers and hang posters in businesses and apartment building entryways. District neighborhood relations offices encourage organizations to get involved and send their members to the meetings, and they maintain mailing lists from sign-in sheets completed at the meetings. One district arranged to have beat maps and a list of upcoming meetings stapled to the lids of pizza boxes delivered in their area. Low-turnout beats often raffle off donated smoke detectors and crime prevention equipment at the conclusion of their meetings, to reward attendees. In an attempt to reach out more effectively to the city's growing Latino population, beginning in 2002, the department began circulating Spanish and English-language beat meeting schedules and maps at hundreds of Catholic churches. On occasion, school children have brought home announcements of beat community meetings. Computer-savvy residents can check the meeting schedule for their beat via the Internet. The city's two cable television channels feature a new 15-minute "Crime Watch" infomercial each week that highlights neighborhood "success stories" and urges watchers to "get with the beat" and attend the meetings. In addition, about 40 community organizers staff a civilian CAPS Implementation Office that is charged with sustaining turnout at beat meeting, marches, assemblies, and problem solving projects. They go door to door in selected areas, trying to form block clubs and encouraging residents to attend beat meetings.

Beat meetings are one of the most distinctive features of Chicago's community policing program, and observers come from all over the world to see how they work. It turns out that

meeting attendance rates are generally highest in the beats that need the most help. An early concern was that attending beat meetings and forming alliances with the police would be popular in better-off, white, home owning areas of the city, but a tough sell elsewhere. However, beat meetings — and CAPS more generally — are most well known and widely attended in predominately African-American neighborhoods. Surveys indicate that about 80 percent of Chicagoans are aware of the city’s community policing program and 60 percent know about neighborhood beat meetings, and that this awareness is highest among African-Americans. Their enthusiasm for the program is bad news as well as good news, for beat meeting attendance rates are principally driven by concern about violent crime, social disorder, street drug markets and other neighborhood problems. But the result is that attendance is highest in the city’s poorest, most disorganized and highest-crime neighborhoods.

A second common feature of community policing departments is that they attempt to decentralize responsibility and authority. Decentralization strategies are partly managerial and partly operational. In management terms, many departments try to delegate more responsibility for identifying and responding to chronic crime and disorder problems to mid-level district commanders. This has forced them to experiment with how to structure and manage decentralization in a way that holds mid-level managers accountable for measures of their success. Here community policing intersects with another movement in policing, one toward a culture of systematic performance measurement and managerial accountability. At the same time, more responsibility for identifying and responding to community problems is typically delegated to individual patrol officers and their sergeants, who are encouraged to take the initiative in finding ways to deal with a broad range of problems specific to the communities they serve. Decentralization, paired with a commitment to consultation and engagement with local communities, allows the police to respond to problems that are important to particular communities, and it legitimates having one priority in one part of town, and allocating resources some other way somewhere else.

Chicago completely reorganized the work of its patrol division in order to support community policing. The department formed teams of officers with responsibility for each of the city’s 279 beats. Each team consists of nine officers, which is about the number it takes to staff a beat 24-by-7, plus a sergeant who is assigned to coordinate their activities. The 911 system was reconfigured to concentrate their activities in their assigned beat, effectively restructuring the daily work of thousands of patrol officers. The system prioritizes dispatching in a way that keeps them in their beat about 70 percent of the time, with some “unassigned” time available for getting out of their cars to attend meetings and talk with residents, merchants and building managers. Calls in their beat that they cannot answer are forwarded to rapid response cars, which take up the slack.

The goal of engaging with the public was directly supported by this operational decentralization. Beat cars are identifiable by their beat number, which is posted on the top of the vehicle, and they have become very familiar to local residents. Team members regularly attend meetings in “their” beat, and they have a sense of ownership of place that did not exist before the teams were created. Residents complain when they don’t see “their” beat officers around, a reciprocal sense of ownership that certainly did not exist before CAPS. The entire team meets quarterly to discuss their priorities and strategies.

One of the tasks they are supposed to attend to is working on their beat's priority problems. Under the watchful eye of their sergeant, each team maintains a list of about three priority problems that they have identified based on crime reports and 911 calls, complaints voiced at beat meetings, and their own observations of their assigned beats. They create a formal beat plan for each that describes the nature of the problem and records major actions they have taken to counter it. The plan form tracks reported crimes and 911 calls regarding the problem. All of this is maintained on-line, where it can be reviewed by their sergeant and her boss, the "CAPS lieutenant." The district's CAPS lieutenant must approve each plan, and must later approve closing it when the problem has receded. These plans provide major input into the crafting of district level plans, so senior managers at that level also review them on a regular basis. A 2002 study of a sample of 68 beat plans found that in a year about half of them were successfully resolved. Because the department's definition of a "problem" includes that it cannot be resolved by the regular routines of patrol work, this was a respectable accomplishment.

A third feature of many community policing departments is that they embrace a broad-ranging problem solving orientation toward much of their work. Other chapters in this Encyclopedia address problem solving as an organizational strategy. Community policing problem solving involves the public in identifying and prioritizing a broad range of chronic neighborhood conditions, and it may involve the public in solving them. Departments doing both community policing and problem solving also find that they must take on a much broader range of issues than they did before. This is one of the consequences of opening themselves up to the public. At community meetings residents complain about bad buildings, noise, and people draining their car radiators at the curb, not just about burglary. If police reply "that's not our responsibility" and try to move on, no one will come to the next meeting. As a result, they need to form partnerships with other agencies of government who can help them out, for while loose garbage and rats in an alley may be a big issue for residents, police are not organized to do the cleanup. Their partners frequently include bureaucracies responsible for health, housing, and even street lighting. And community policing also involves the public in solving problems. Neighborhood residents can paint over graffiti, walk their dogs in areas frequented by prostitutes, and hold prayer vigils in the midst of street drug markets.

Problem solving is one of the key components of CAPS. In Chicago, a "problem" is defined as "a group of related incidents or an ongoing situation that concerns a significant portion of those who live or work in a particular area." Links between incidents can arise because they share common victims, offenders or methods of operation, but most are defined by their concentration in specific locations. Problems are also persistent: they are unlikely to disappear without an intervention of some significance, because they typically have survived routine efforts by the police to resolve them. Because they are persistent, repeated incidents probably share causes, so dealing with these underlying sources may prevent future problems. It is also important that problems potentially can be solved using the resources that police and the community can bring to bear on them; they cannot take on society's largest problems at the beat level. Finally, while dealing with crime remains at the heart of the police mission, problems can include a broad range of community concerns. They range from noise to the dilapidated condition of many of the city's older rental buildings, and include a host of social disorders, municipal service shortcomings and a broad range of code enforcement matters.

Chicago police and thousands of residents have been trained to respond to local problems using a five-step process. They have been taught to identify problems and prioritize them, and then analyze them by gathering information about offenders, victims and locations of crimes. Subsequently, they are to design strategies that might deal with the chronic character of priority problems. They are asked to “think outside the box” of traditional police enforcement tactics and to use new tools that have been developed to support their problem-solving efforts. Chicago’s model also recognizes a stage during which the community, police and other city departments implement strategies. This highlights the special skill and effort required to actually set plans in motion. Finally, police and residents are to evaluate their own effectiveness by assessing how well they carried out their plan and how much good they accomplished.

Public participation in problem solving is fairly widespread. Residents are prominently involved in weekend graffiti cleanups and “positive loitering” campaigns which attempt to reclaim the streets from street prostitutes and public drinking. The mayor heads a CAPS take-back-the-neighborhood march almost every Saturday morning. A survey of participants at beat meetings found 53 percent reporting being involved in one or more CAPS-related problem solving projects or bring problems to the attention of their alderman. Other groups sponsor neighborhood patrols, which the department officially does not support because of the risk of law suits, and 20 percent of beat meeting participants reported being active in those. All of this activism was more frequent in higher-crime, predominately African-American parts of the city.

Agency partnerships are another key feature of an effective program. In cities where community policing is the police department’s program, problem solving typically addresses only a narrow range of issues, not the broad range of problems that CAPS has taken on. In Chicago, CAPS is the city’s program, and every relevant agency is making an effort to support problem solving at the beat and district level. The CAPS Implementation Office provides the inter-agency coordination that is required to address the most significant problems. The city attorney’s office and a multi-agency inspection task force support district efforts to deal with gang and drug houses by using build, fire and health codes to force landlords to take action.

Community policing, Chicago style, thus involves all of the major elements of this model of policing. It was intended to be transformational; that is, it was to change the way in which the entire department and even city government did its business, and not just special units or even just the police department. It weaves responsibility for problem solving into the daily routines of beat officers, and integrates them into the fabric of the community. It created a mechanism by which the public can influence and monitor the work of officers in their neighborhood, and do so in a constructive and collaborative way. And it is probably here to stay. Immensely popular with the public, community policing has become the routine way in which Chicagoans expect police services to be delivered, giving the program the political support it might require to survive budgetary downturns and changes in administration.

Further Reading

Skogan, Wesley G., ed. *Community Policing: Can It Work?* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2003.

Skogan, Wesley G. and Susan Hartnett. *Community Policing, Chicago Style*. New York: Oxford

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