Community Policing: Common Impediments to Success

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According to the first survey finding reported in Chapter 4, community policing is very popular. So popular is the concept with politicians, city managers, and the general public that few police chiefs want to be caught without adopting something they can call community policing. The 1997 survey of police departments indicated that 85 percent had reported adopting community policing or were in the process of doing so (see Table 4-1). The biggest reason for not doing so was that it was "not practical" in the community at this time. The departments not engaged in community policing were mostly small, with only a few officers. Cities with populations greater than 100,000 all claimed in the 1997 survey to have adopted community policing—half by 1991 and the other half between 1992 and 1997. This group included urban giants as well as places like Akron, Ohio; Richmond, Virginia; Mobile, Alabama; and Jersey City, New Jersey.

There are reasons to be skeptical of these claims, for I have learned that adopting community policing is hard work, and the political risks it entails

are considerable. What do cities that claim they are doing community policing actually do? Many claim to have adopted a long list of projects or tactics (see Chapter 4). Some of the "community policing" departments I have visited patrol on foot or perhaps on horses and bicycles. Some train civilians in citizen police academies, open small neighborhood offices, conduct surveys to measure community satisfaction, publish newsletters, conduct drug education projects, and work with municipal agencies to enforce health and safety regulations.

Community policing, however, is not defined by these kinds of projects. Projects, programs, and tactics come and go as conditions change. Community policing is not a set of specific programs. Rather, it is a way of changing decision-making processes and creating new cultures within police departments. It is an organizational strategy that redefines the goals of policing but leaves the means of achieving those goals to citizens and the police who serve in their neighborhoods. Community policing is a process rather than a product.

General Principles of Community Policing

Four general principles define community policing: community engagement, problem solving, organizational transformation, and crime prevention by citizens and police working together.

First, community policing requires that police respond to the public when they set priorities and develop their tactics. Effective community policing requires responsiveness to citizen input concerning both the needs of the community and the best ways by which the police can help meet those needs. It takes seriously the public's definition of its own problems. This is one reason why community policing is an organizational strategy, not a set of specific programs. How it looks in practice should vary considerably from place to place in response to unique local situations and circumstances. Better listening to the community can produce different policing priorities. Officers involved in neighborhood policing quickly learn that many residents are deeply concerned about problems that previously did not come to the attention of police. The public often focuses on threatening and fear-provoking *conditions* rather than discrete and legally defined *incidents*. They often are concerned about casual social disorder and the physical decay of their community rather than traditionally defined "serious crimes." The police, however, are organized to respond to the latter under the traditional model of policing.

The second principle is that community policing assumes a commitment to broadly focused, problem-oriented policing. Problem-oriented policing encourages officers to respond creatively to problems that they encounter, or to refer them to public and private agencies that can help. More importantly, it stresses the importance of discovering the situations that produce calls for police assistance. Police need to identify the causes that lie behind the calls and design tactics to deal with these causes. Officers must be trained in methods of identifying and analyzing problems. Police work traditionally has consisted of responding sequentially to individual events; problem solving calls for recognizing patterns of incidents. Helpful in this identification are computer analyses of "hot spots": places where numerous complaints and calls for service arise. Problem-oriented policing recognizes that the solutions to patterns of incidents may involve other agencies and may be "nonpolice" in character; in traditional departments, this would be cause for ignoring these problems.

Third, community policing involves organizational decentralization and a reorientation of patrol in order to facilitate communication between police and the public. Line officers are expected to work more autonomously at investigating situations, resolving problems, and educating the public. They are being asked to discover and set their own goals and sometimes to manage their work schedules. Decentralization facilitates the development of local solutions to local problems and discourages the automatic application of central-office policies. The police are not independent of the rest of society, in which large organizations have learned that decentralization often allows flexibility in decision making at the customer-contact level. Accordingly, many departments that adopt a serious community policing stance strip a layer or two from their rank structures to shorten lines of communication within the agency.

Finally, community policing involves helping neighborhoods solve crime problems on their own, through community organizations and crime prevention programs. The idea that the police and the public are "co-producers" of safety, and that they cannot claim a monopoly over fighting crime, predates the current rhetoric of community policing. In fact, the community crime prevention movement in American policing during the 1970s was an important precursor to community policing. It promoted the idea that crime was not solely the responsibility of the police. The police were quick to endorse the claim that they could not solve crime problems without community support and assistance, for it helped share the blame for rising crime rates at the time. Now police find that they are expected to

lead this effort. They are being called upon to take the lead in mobilizing individuals and organizations around crime prevention. These efforts include neighborhood watch, citizen patrols, and education programs stressing household target-hardening, and rapid crime reporting.

Implementing Community Policing "On the Cheap"

Adhering to the preceding principles of community policing is difficult, and it is risky to undertake the kinds of hard organizational changes that have been described. Therefore, many departments are tempted to try and adopt community policing "on the cheap" instead. Unfortunately, they have adopted community policing programs that feature shortcuts. A few of the most common shortcuts are described below.

Make Community Policing an Overtime Program

For years, many departments paid volunteer officers some extra money for conducting community-oriented projects. The officers were to do community policing *after* their day of "real" police work. Not only were they tired, but the officers, it seems, were unlikely to do things differently during that extra two hours. I once studied a narcotics team in a large southern city that was paid to do "community-oriented narcotics policing" for an extra three hours, four days each week. There was a lot of federal money for the program, but I found the officers did not have the slightest idea how to do "community-oriented narcotics policing." They all worked undercover, dressed like pirates, and could not reveal themselves to the community!

Form a Special Community Policing Unit

Community policing units are usually volunteer units as well. Often working outside of the regular chain of command, they are directed by the chief's office, or they are part of a special bureau separated from the main patrol division. The special unit strategy means that the department does not have to address difficult issues of supervision, performance evaluation, or resistance to the project among officers. Officers with community assignments may appear to have easy lives. They are frequently in the media and get invited to attend conferences in other cities. Sometimes they are free to choose their own work hours, and somehow they always seem to decide that they are really needed on their beat from 9 to 5, Mondays

through Fridays. Officers who serve in these units may be seen as not "real police." What they do gets labeled "social work," the job of "empty holster guys" and not of "real police officers." Morale flounders, and some of the best officers will try to transfer out. In a large southwestern city, community officers get flexible shifts, carry a cell phone, and take a patrol car home every night. When I asked an officer what the rest of the department thought of members of the community policing unit, she replied, "They really hate us."

Shortchange the Infrastructure

One important organizational function that often gets shortchanged is training. Training is expensive, and officers have to be removed from the line—or paid overtime—to attend. During the early 1980s, a large southwestern agency tried to run a program with no training at all; they hoped that officers (who were doing it as an overtime assignment) would guess what to do from the name of the project. More recently, in a large West Coast jurisdiction, officers received one day of training; in another major agency, it was two. This is for a project that is supposed to revolutionize policing.

Why Community Policing Efforts Fail

Departments are tempted to take these shortcuts because adopting community policing is risky. There are good reasons to be nervous about undertaking the hard and expensive organizational reforms community policing requires. Community policing efforts can fail for many reasons. The wise police administrator should have a defensive plan to counter the reasons for failure listed below. The list is a depressingly long one. Once I wrote it down, I wondered how anyone could be optimistic. But thankfully there are those who are.

Resistance in the Ranks

Efforts to implement community policing can flounder in the face of resistance by rank-and-file officers. Public officials' and community activists' enthusiasm for neighborhood-oriented policing encourages its detractors within the police to dismiss it as "just politics" or another passing civilian fad. Some police are skeptical about programs invented by civilians—persons, they are convinced, who cannot possibly understand their job. They

are particularly hostile to programs that threaten to involve civilians in setting standards or evaluating their performance. They also do not like civilians influencing their operational priorities. Volunteer units or overtime programs are obviously attractive in this environment. No one *has* to do community policing, and sometimes there is extra money for doing it.

Resistance by Police Managers

Resistance to community policing does not come only from the bottom of the organization. Mid-level management revolts have sunk community policing in several cities. These managers see authority taken from them and pushed to lower levels in the organization. Supervisors typically are command-and-control oriented, and they feel most comfortable when everything is done by the book. Their own opportunities for promotion may be limited by shrinking management layers and the flattening of the formal rank structure that goes along with many efforts to decentralize in accord with the community policing model. Discussions of community policing often feature management buzz words like "empowerment" and "trust," and it makes these mid-level managers nervous. Top management worries about corruption and inefficiency. This is one reason why special community policing units are often run from the chief's office. Or, to avoid entrenched bureaucracy, the department may decide to house the units in a special new bureau.

Resistance by Police Unions

Unions' response to community policing is variable. In Chicago the major police union has endorsed community policing, but in many cities unions have decided to attack the program. In a West Coast city, the union protested strongly against the community policing program (giving it the familiar "social work" label) and threatened to keep officers from appearing at training at all. A week's planned training became a day, as a compromise. In many cities the contract that the union has with the city binds the department to work rules, performance standards, and personnel allocations that run counter to the organizational changes required by community policing. For example, in Chicago, officers' work in the city is decided by seniority, and it is impossible to put officers where you want them (based on their language capabilities, for example) or to keep them assigned to a beat if they want to leave.

Resistance by Special Units

In my experience, special units (like detectives) often are threatened by department-wide community policing programs that require them to change their ways (for example, to exchange information with uniformed officers and the general public, and to open to debate their effectiveness). Often special units have special relationships with politicians who will move to protect them. I described one city's detectives as "the biggest, toughest, and best-armed gang in town" (although in truth there are four bigger and better armed gangs—street gangs). These detectives proved very difficult to integrate into the city's community policing program.

Competing Demands and Expectations

Police managers and city executives also have to find the officers required to staff the program. Community policing is labor intensive and may require more officers. Finding the money to hire more officers to staff community policing assignments is hard, so departments may try to reduce existing projects. This can bring conflict with powerful police executives and politicians who support current arrangements. Community policing advocates also face the 911 problem. Police commitment to respond to 911 calls as quickly as possible dominates the resource expenditures of most departments. Community policing has encountered heavy political resistance when the perception has arisen (encouraged by its opponents) that resources previously devoted to responding to emergency calls were being diverted to this untried social experiment.

Lack of Interagency Cooperation

Adopting community policing inevitably means accepting a widely expanded definition of the responsibilities of police. When the public becomes involved in setting priorities, issues previously outside the police mandate will be included high on the agenda. Police can note that trash-filled vacant lots are a high-priority problem, but they have to turn to other city agencies to get them cleaned up. For a long list of familiar bureaucratic and political reasons, those agencies may think that community policing is the police department's program—not theirs—and resist bending their own professional and budget-constrained priorities. Making this kind of inter-organizational cooperation work turns out to be one of the most difficult

problems facing innovative departments. When the police chief in an East Coast city was new, he told me that he could handle things in his department. His biggest fear was that his mayor might not handle the city's other agencies and that they would not provide the kind of support that community policing requires. Here is a rule: If community policing is the police department's program, it will fail. Community policing must be the city's program.

Problems Evaluating Performance

The problem-solving component of community policing shifts the unit of work from individual incidents to clustered problems, and those are harder to count. It is also hard to evaluate whether problem solving is effective and whether individual officers are doing a good or a bad job at it. The public often wants action on things that department information systems do not count at all. As a result, both individual and unit performance is hard to measure or reward. However, the thrust of CompStat and other new "accountability processes" in police departments is that measured activities get attention and unmeasured accomplishments do not, even if the measured activities do not matter very much.

An Unresponsive Public

Ironically, it is difficult to sustain community involvement in community policing. The community and the police may not have a history of getting along in poor neighborhoods. Organizations representing the interests of community members may not have a track record of cooperating with police, and poor and high-crime areas often are not well endowed with an infrastructure of organizations ready to get involved. Fear of retaliation by gangs and drug dealers can undermine public involvement. Finally, there may be no reason for residents of crime-ridden neighborhoods to think that community policing will turn out to be anything but another broken promise. Residents may be accustomed to seeing programs come and go in response to political and budgetary cycles that are out of their control.

Nasty Misconduct

The investment that police make in community policing is always at risk. When use of excessive force or killings by police becomes a public issue,

years of progress in police–community relations can disappear. Similarly, revelations of widespread or deep corruption by police can undo past gains. Nasty misconduct can undermine community policing because it can cause department and city leaders to lose their focus on managing innovation. The mayor of one major city once remarked to me that he had to think about his police department every day. He hated that, but he knew that managing change in large organizations requires focus. Nasty misconduct causes city and department leaders to lose that focus, and it diverts the attention of the media.

Leadership Transitions

When new police chiefs and mayors come into office, they want to do new things. They want to make their own mark. They often have little interest in picking up the unfinished projects of the people they replaced. The old chief in one town I know struggled for a decade to build a new community-policing program. But when he retired, his replacement (who came from out of town) had no interest in the program at all, and it was gone overnight. If community policing is to persist, it must be the city's program, not just the police department's program.

Conclusion

In light of these daunting problems, it is surprising that policing has responded as much as it has to the popular and political forces pushing it toward community policing. Astute executives can overcome the problems; the most important thing they can do is ensure that community policing *is* the city's program, not just their program. That can give them staying power with the city council when budgets are tight and resources are hard to come by for training and community outreach. Political support and deep support from the community are also tools for quelling internal dissent. Building capital with the community can pay dividends when things go unfortunately wrong, because the promise that it won't happen again will have some credibility. Involving other city agencies in community policing can give them visible results, while the less visible things they hope for have a chance to take hold. Finally, if community policing is the city's program, maybe even the chief's successor will think it is a good idea, or at least one that he or she must promise to get behind in order to get the job.