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### Making Better Use of Victims and Witnesses

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Commissioning a series of essays on policing focusing on “getting serious about crime control” might imply that the principal route to that end is through law enforcement. This could be true, but not if new energies are simply appended to the usual modes of policing. Rather, even at the heart of the traditional police function—solving crimes and apprehending criminals—the most cost-effective innovations must necessarily encourage more citizen involvement in keeping the peace. This is because citizens hold a virtual monopoly over the key item necessary to succeed in combatting crime: information. Understanding how much and what kind of information is out there and organizing to gather and use it more effectively could be the key to making significant gains in real police productivity.

One reason for concern about solving crimes and making arrests is that by some important measures the police are not doing these things very well. The picture is particularly bleak when we examine the most frequently cited indicator of their performance, the clearance rate. Clearance rates never have been high for many types of crime, a fact that thus far has eluded the police. Opinion studies indicate that people consistently overestimate the success the police have in making arrests, perhaps due to the steady diet of masterful detective work they see on television. The reality is that the police clear in one fashion or another only about one-quarter of the robberies that come to their attention and only about 15 percent of burglaries and thefts. In big cities clearance rates are even lower. Those figures appear worse if more re-

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efined measures of success are employed. One study in New York City looked carefully at clearances, including the credibility of "multiple" clearances (attributing many crimes to one felon) and the veracity of "administrative" clearances (wiping crimes off the books for technical, organizational, or policy reasons). It concluded that only about 4 percent of burglaries and larcenies, 8 percent of auto thefts, and 13 percent of robberies were definitely "solved." Studies of other cities have come up with similar figures (Greenwood et al. 1975; Reiss 1971).

Worse, another way of looking at the rate at which crimes are solved is to compare them not with "crimes known to the police" (the official count) but with a better estimate of the true number of crimes that have been committed. Because a great number of incidents go unreported by victims or unrecorded by the police, victimization surveys have been used to make independent measurements of their frequency. When these estimates of the total of personal, household, and commercial crimes are compared to arrests, the true "solution rates" for robbery, rape, and assault are further reduced by a factor of more than 3 (Skogan and Antunes 1979). Finally, clearance rates look bad because they are declining. For example, in Illinois, clearances for murder have dropped from 90 to 77 percent and from 21 to 17 percent for burglary since 1972.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, there is great interest in devising better ways of apprehending criminals. Some reforms in this area involve hardware, some software, and some more or better trained patrol officers. One of the most innovative ideas in crime control has been that of "co-production." The notion is a simple one: To a large extent the police are dependent on the cooperation of citizens to produce a safe environment. Most of the attention given to co-production has been devoted to community crime prevention, including such programs as BlockWatch, OperationID, and other self-help measures. These are neighborhood-based volunteer activities, often assisted by police community service officers (Podolefsky and DuBow 1981). These efforts are the wave of the future because they are "off-budget." They promise to have some effect in reducing crime without significant expenditure on the part of the government. Such prevention programs have a demonstrable effect for the better on fear of crime and public morale. They may reduce the unrealistic expectations people have about the role of the police in preventing crime by making clear their own responsibilities. Thus they are good politics because they get people involved and give them a sense of confidence without costing or (perhaps) promising too much.

However, not all co-production is confined to prevention activities. There are also important roles for citizens to play in the traditional police domain of solving crimes and catching criminals. While some of what the police do is self-initiated, the vast majority of serious crimes with victims are brought to their attention by the public, and (other than traffic) a similarly large pro-

portion of all encounters between the police and individual citizens are initiated by the latter (Reiss 1971). One of the most important aspects of those transactions is that information changes hands. In their roles as victims and witnesses, citizens have a virtual monopoly over information about who did what, and this tight control extends over almost all Index and most non-Index crimes. Probably the most critical aspect of policing is how effectively the authorities gain access to this information, and much of what the police do and how they are organized reflect implicit theories about the best way of doing this. For example, one of the central features of police departments is that they are organized to minimize response time. Their almost exclusive reliance on squad cars, the placement of those cars on beats rather than near station houses and under the eye of sergeants, work-load-based personnel allocations across shifts, and massive capital investments in communication dispatch systems—all reflect the assumption that the key to identifying offenders is getting to crime scenes fast. The fact that this is untrue in almost every circumstance is only now worming itself into the field (Van Kirk 1977). But the possibility of gathering more information in other, better, ways remains the greatest hope for dramatic improvements in the success of police departments in clearing criminal cases.

### STUDIES OF INFORMATION

Some of the most controversial evaluations of police work have concerned how effectively they manage the task of acquiring and using information. Examinations of detective operations by the Rand Corporation, the Stanford Research Institute, and the Urban Institute dramatized the matter by claiming they do it very poorly (Greenwood et al. 1975; Greenberg, Yu, and Lang 1973; Bloch and Bell 1976). Those evaluations emphasized the critical role of information gathered immediately after the crime by responding patrol officers and, in particular, the importance of clear and specific suspect identifications by victims and witnesses.

The single most important determinant of whether or not a case will be solved is the information the victim supplies to the immediately responding patrol officer. If information that uniquely identifies the perpetrator is not presented at the time the crime is reported, the perpetrator, by and large, will not be subsequently identified. (Greenwood et al. 1975, p. ix)

The Washington, D.C., “supercops” study conducted by INSLAW looked at another problem but came to a complementary finding (Forst, Lucianovic, and Cox 1977). The investigation was concerned with why some D.C. patrol officers were so much more effective than others at making arrests—and making them stick. A study of department records indicated a few officers were

making most D.C. felony arrests, and the evaluation was to find out why. The answer seemed to be that these so-called supercops took information seriously. They devoted a great deal of attention to rounding up bystanders at crime scenes and attempting to convert them to witnesses. They carefully questioned bystanders and victims and kept them apart from suspects if they were still around. (Among other things this tactic diminishes the common problem that bystanders, afraid of retaliation, give the police false names and addresses [Cannavale and Falcon 1977].) Moreover, these officers kept in contact with witnesses to find out what they had heard and to keep them committed to the case and willing to appear (perhaps several times) in court. This is also extremely important. Analyses of court records indicate the availability of nonpolice witnesses leads to much higher rates of conviction and that witness noncooperation is the leading cause of evidentiary problems in the prosecutor's office (Forst, Lucianovic, and Cox 1977; see also McDonald's chapter and McNamara's response). Supercops did not drive to crime scenes any faster. Rather, they were very "people-oriented" in their investigation and paid attention to what witnesses and victims had to say.

Other research indicates there are a lot of people around crime scenes who potentially have something to tell the police. This can be seen in the findings of the National Crime Survey (NCS), a continuing survey conducted by the Census Bureau for an arm of the Justice Department.<sup>2</sup> This survey reveals that most victims of personal crimes know a substantial amount about "whodunit," and under many circumstances there are also other people around (beside victims and predators) who potentially could be tapped for information as well.

As part of the crime survey, victims are quizzed in some detail about the characteristics of the perpetrators of offenses. The most striking fact about the resulting data is the great gulf between personal and property crimes in the amount of information that victims have to offer. In the case of burglaries and thefts, victims are willing to hazard few guesses about offenders, for fewer than 5 percent witnessed the crime or saw the getaway. On the other hand, most personal crime victims know a substantial amount about their attackers. Overall, about 50 percent had seen them before, and almost 40 percent were at least casually acquainted with the miscreant. This positive identification is critical, for it is very unlikely the police will clear a crime by making an arrest unless someone identifies the perpetrator and has a good idea about where he or she can be found. In the Rand Corporation study of detective productivity (Greenwood et al. 1975), the most important of the "solvability factors" the researchers could isolate was the ability of responding officers (not detectives, for they could not add much) to get a name and location of a suspect from those on the scene.<sup>3</sup> The possibility of positive identification was higher for victims of assault and rape than for victims of other personal crimes. Virtually none of those struck by a purse snatcher or pickpocket knew

much about the identity of the offender, although some could describe the culprit in general terms. Overall, only 8 percent of personal crime victims could not remember the race of offenders, and 17 percent were unwilling to hazard a guess about age. Much of that confusion was confined to multiple-offender cases, and the percentage of victims able to describe the age of their attacker was more than 97 percent in one-offender cases.

Another issue on which the NCS sheds some light is the frequency with which there are, at least potentially, witnesses to personal crimes. This is indicated very indirectly by victims' responses to the question, Were you the only person there besides the offender(s)? In a surprisingly large number of cases they were not. Between 1973 and 1979, "other people" appear to have been around in 25 percent of rapes, 38 percent of robberies, 63 percent of assaults, 51 percent of purse snatchings, and 67 percent of pickpocket cases. Although this finding only crudely indicates the extent to which these bystanders actually witnessed the crime, the figures do belie somewhat the stereotype that danger is confined to empty streets. Some studies of police files have reached a similar conclusion (for example, one in California found that other people were described as being "nearby" in 50 percent of robberies). On the other hand, an investigation of the same issue using the files of six local police agencies in New York found witnesses were present in less than 10 percent of reported burglaries and thefts (Feeney and Weir 1973; Pope 1977).

The NCS also asked about the reporting of crimes to the police. According to the survey very few burglaries were reported by persons who were not members of the victimized household, and many of those incidents were reported long after the event. Further, even witnesses to personal crimes do not do much that is constructive about things they see. Persons other than the victim or a member of his or her household are involved in reporting only a fraction of all personal crimes. Of the crimes reported, other witnesses did so in 20 percent of assaults, 16 percent of rapes, robberies, and purse snatchings, and only 6 percent of pickpocket cases. The gap between other persons "being there" and being the ones who report crimes is considerable.

Finally, the NCS, which was conducted in part because it was apparent large numbers of offenses were going unreported, documents that in major crime categories victims and witnesses report only about half of all incidents, except in some important categories where that percentage is even lower. For example, police are informed about half of the rapes, assaults, and purse snatches and about 55 percent of robberies but about only 25 percent of all simple property thefts. These levels of nonreporting have several significant consequences for policing. Large numbers of offenses are hidden from official view. They do not enter the planning or allocation calculations made by police departments. Their perpetrators are largely immune from police action. There are so many unreported crimes that the actual rate at which they

are solved by arrest is unlikely to have much deterrent effect on desperate adults or adventure-seeking young males, whose chances of being apprehended for any particular offense must be extremely low. Finally, the existence of this large pool of unreported incidents threatens the evaluation of innovation in police work. One of the first things that happens when effective, citizen-oriented crime prevention programs are mounted is that the official crime rate soars (Schneider 1976). While this is in reality a consequence of increased crime reporting and new confidence in the police, it can be hard to explain to city councils.

## IMPLICATIONS

All of this suggests there is a great deal of untapped information about crime and criminals in the hands of victims and witnesses. More people are apparently around than are taking an active role in reporting crimes, and victims of personal crimes have a fair amount of detailed information to contribute about offenders. Significant increases in the certainty of arrest of those committing crimes may be gained by extending the arm of the law more deeply into this pool of currently unidentified offenders. The issue from the point of view of the police is how to gather and utilize information better and how to encourage citizens to play a more active role in assisting in that effort.

The "supercops" study pointed to a number of specifics that seemed to enhance the effectiveness of patrol officers in doing their part. The Police Foundation's response time study in Kansas City examined the relationship between how fast the police arrived on the scene and the presence of bystanders, on the presumption that they will quickly drift away after the excitement dies down (Van Kirk 1977). This study found that response times have to be unrealistically short to have much effect. Other research on police management has focused on the opposite problem, how to identify and shunt aside quickly the inevitably large number of cases that are essentially devoid of useful information. The Police Executive Research Forum, the Stanford Research Institute, and other organizations have conducted "burglary investigation" studies to specify decision rules for guiding police investigators in doing this (Eck 1979; Greenberg 1977). As indicated above, the NCS suggests that this is a good idea, as the incidence of "don't know" responses is very high for questions about the details of burglaries and simple thefts. Presumably, by shedding the lead of unproductive cases, more resources can be directed toward those that promise to be solvable – which is largely a question of how much information is available about them.

Another area of improvement would involve recognizing the importance of patrol officers in clearing crimes. Currently they are expected to give cases only perfunctory attention and then return to "active duty." Cases are fol-

lowed up later by detectives, who turn over the same ground and usually add little useful information to the case file. Experiments with "full service" policing by patrol officers, teaming detectives with uniformed personnel, and other forms of organization that encourage officers first on the scene to pursue the case as long as it seems to pay off have led to substantial increases in arrest productivity (Bloch and Bell 1976).

The problem of how to get more bystanders to step forward is a difficult one. Most scholarly research on bystanders in emergency situations has focused on their personal intervention in those emergencies. There is a great deal of evidence that citizens are relatively willing to step into cases involving less serious offenses (for example, delinquencies) and that such intervention enhances the effectiveness of the informal system of social control in their neighborhood. When serious crimes involving older offenders occur, however, intervening can be a risky move.

One of the presumptions behind renewed interest in foot patrol is that the easy interaction between police and citizens it presumably fosters will encourage more communication about persons and events in the neighborhood (Police Foundation 1981; Wilson and Kelling 1982; see also Kelling's "order maintenance" chapter). A great deal of useful information that currently somehow does not seem appropriate for the emergency number could flow from that exchange. This is congruent with academic experiments on the reporting of staged crimes in real settings, like supermarkets. Shoppers who have been encouraged even in subtle ways to report crimes when they see them are much more likely to do so, and they are also more likely to report to clerks with whom they already have had a pleasant encounter (Bickman 1975).

There may be a significant role for public education concerning the importance of good witness-like behavior. People should be reminded of the importance of noting the appearance of suspicious parties and unique ways of identifying them (such as license plate numbers and who else was around at the moment). There already have been many (unevaluated) campaigns encouraging bystanders to call the police when they witness crimes or even suspicious circumstances. Community crime prevention programs always stress the importance of prompt and thorough reporting and can have strong effects on the reporting rate for an area. Opinion surveys indicate that there is a great deal of public interest in crime prevention and that great masses of people can be reached effectively with simple messages about possible actions they can take. A recent evaluation of the "McGruff" crime prevention dog ad campaign indicates that he is recognized by 50 percent of adults, and most of those can recall at least one specific about the message he bears (Mendelsohn and O'Keefe 1981). New rounds of the McGruff campaign will be featuring police-community relations and crime reporting, which may stimulate more positive action on the part of witnesses to crime.

If the large number of persons who are apparently around when crimes occur were to become more involved as bystanders, the implications for crime control would also be considerable. One of the fundamental tenets of prevention theory is that "surveillance" activities and "territorial" reactions to illegitimate activity will stop crimes from being committed in the first place. Thus encouraging a greater role for citizens in solving crime and apprehending offenders may, in the long run, have actual prevention effects as well.

#### NOTES

1. These figures were supplied by the Statistical Analysis Center, Illinois Law Enforcement Commission.
2. The analyses reported here were conducted by the author. A general description of the National Crime Survey can be found in Garofalo and Hindelang (1977).
3. The extent to which victims can make such an identification is, of course, only an imperfect indication of how many crimes could be solved in that way.