Chapter 4

Problem Solving Policing and Racial Conflict in the United States

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Introduction

Public opinion surveys indicate that the American public generally supports the police. About 60 per cent indicate that they have confidence in the police, and when asked to rate their general performance about 60 per cent indicate that it is excellent or good, rather than fair or poor. Nationally, these figures have not changed very much during the 1980s; in 1982 about 65 per cent of the public gave the police a 'good' rating, and in 1986 this figure stood at 59 per cent, which is not as different than we might expect due to chance differences between the samples.

By-and-large, Americans see the job of the police as crime fighting. When asked what the most important task of the police is, over 80 per cent think that it is preventing and solving crimes rather than such alternatives as directing traffic or assisting in disaster relief. This is not to their advantage, for the public also does not feel that they are very effective at dealing with crime. When asked about how good the police are at maintaining law and order in their community only about 40 per cent indicate that they are very effective. When asked how confident they are in the police's ability to protect them from violent crime, the percentage of the American public indicating that they have a great deal of confidence stood at only about 15 per cent during the 1980s. In the same period, between 45 and 50 per cent of the population said they did not have very much confidence in the ability of the police to protect them. A 1989 national survey asked, 'Do you feel adequately protected by the police from being a victim of crime?' — 53 per cent of Americans said 'no'.

However, the most prominent feature of American opinion about police is how sharply divided people are by race and class. Residents of poor neighborhoods and those where blacks and persons of Hispanic origin (mostly from Mexico) live are much more negative in their views of the police. Because these neighborhoods are also more likely to face serious crime and drug problems, their views greatly affect the effectiveness of policing.

Figures 1–4 illustrate how sharply neighborhoods are divided in their views of police. *Figure 1* plots the relationship between a measure of affluence (based on income, employment, home ownership, and other factors) and a measure of how good a job residents of 35 big-city neighborhoods think the police are doing. There is a dramatic improvement in ratings of police performance in wealthier areas. With the exception of four neighborhoods, all of which are very poor, the residents of the poorest places were least likely to think the police did a good job at maintaining order, preventing crime, and helping crime victims.
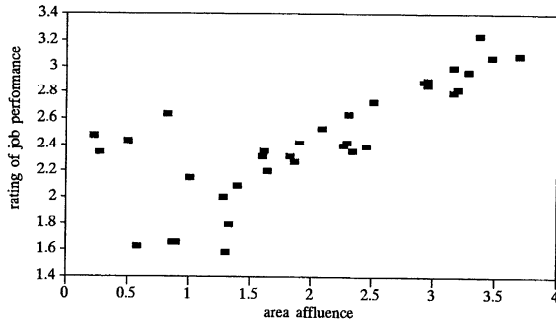
Figure 1. Affluence and Police Performance

Figure 2 presents a similar plot of the relationship between the racial composition of those areas and how good a job people think the police are doing. The relatively small number of neighborhoods in the middle of Figure 2 illustrates how extremely segregated American neighborhoods are by race; most areas were at least 85 per cent white *or* black and Hispanic. Residents of white neighborhoods had much more positive views of police than residents of nonwhite areas, although there was some variation within each area as well. (Affluence explained most of this variation, and the statistical impact of affluence and race was nearly identical.)

Figure 2. Race and Police Performance
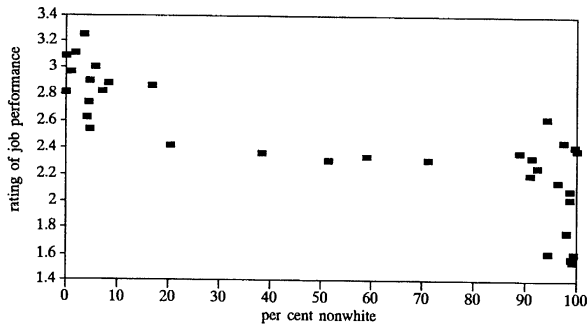
Sources of Opinions about Police

The next question is, Where do these opinions come from? Public attitudes toward police in part reflect the experiences that people have had with them. Direct encounters with the police are commonplace; the surveys examined here indicate that about 50 per cent of big-city residents come into contact with the police during the course of a year. Those who do not have direct contact can easily hear about them from friends who have, for police are a subject of general interest. Another source of popular impressions of the police is the mass media — television, the movies, newspapers, and novels.

Mass Media

It is difficult to conduct research on the effects of the media (we all are bombarded by it on a daily basis), and only a little of that research has focused on police in the media. However, the frequent coverage of the police as news and the tremendous attention that they receive as entertainment suggests that the media are potentially an important source of public impressions of the criminal justice system. Analyses of television and newspapers indicate there is extensive coverage of police issues in the mass media. One study of 900 national television newscasts found law enforcement issues and institutions were included in 87 per cent of them, and were the focus of 12 per cent of all news stories. An analysis of network and Chicago news broadcasts revealed that 20 per cent of all local news stories and 10 per cent of all national stories concerned crime and criminal justice, with the police being mentioned frequently.

The message carried by the media is a mixed one. Fictional programs cover a wide variety of material, including both 'super cops' and brutal and corrupt officers. The most successful crime-fighters are private detectives, who often succeed despite the hinderance of slow-moving and incompetent public police. 'Realistic' police dramas now often depict police corruption, conflict within the police departments, and racial tension. They also portray the world of ordinary officers as violent — one study found that fictional uniformed police and detectives shoot offenders almost as frequently as they arrest them. News coverage of the police is also likely to be negative in tone — this includes stories of police corruption, violence, and participation in criminal activities.

There is no good research on the *impact* of this media coverage on population opinions of police. Almost all sophisticated research on the effects of television has focused on its impact on individual aggression, and almost all research on the print media has focused on how it affects fear of crime and perceptions of trends in crime. Our lack of knowledge also has methodological origins — it is very difficult to separate the effects of why people watch television or read newspapers from what the effects of doing so are on their opinions. For example, heavy television viewers tend to favor police and believe that they are effective, and believe in harsh penalties for criminals. Those who watch crime-oriented television shows are even more extreme on these dimensions, but they also know *fewer* facts about crime. However, it is unclear if these views are caused by their viewing habits, or if these attitudes lead them to seek out television crime shows to watch.

Personal Communication

There is even less known about the impact of hearing accounts of the police from other people. The public probably reads and talks about the police more often than any other unit of government, for the apparent drama of police work — both in fact and fiction — commands a great deal of public attention. A survey in Britain found that 35 per cent of adults got their information about police by talking with other people about them (Skogan, 1990). This raises the question of the extent to which people's attitudes towards the police are shaped by stories that other people recount to them, but we do not know the answer.

Personal Experience

As indicated above, a substantial percentage of the US population has direct contact with police in the course of a year, and research suggests that these personal experiences play an important role in shaping people's opinions of police. Also, because a great deal of personal conversation about the police doubtless involves the experiences that people have had with them, the second-hand flow of information through a community will be profoundly affected by the ways that people typically feel that they are treated by the police.

Patterns of experience with police are clearly related to the class and racial characteristics of the 35 American neighborhoods examined here. *Figure 3* illustrates the relationship between neighborhood affluence and perceptions that police treat people living there fairly and politely. Police are considered more fair and polite in wealthier city neighborhoods.

Figure 3. Affluence and Police Civility
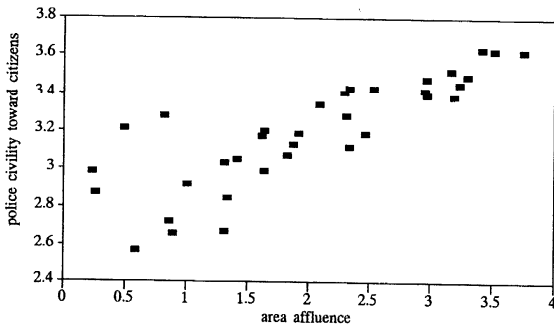
Likewise, *Figure 4* plots the relationship between the racial distribution of these 35 areas and perceptions of police civility. Again, there was a large gulf between the views of largely black and largely white neighborhoods.

Figure 4. Race and Police Civility
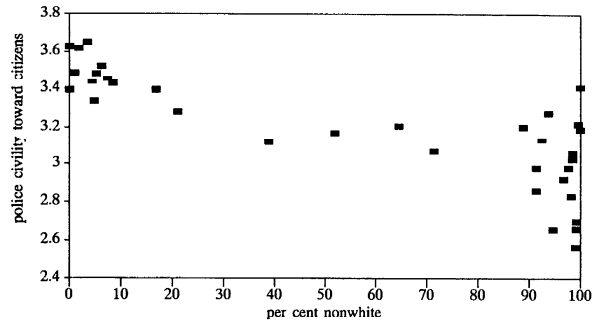
An Experiment in Policing

Many American police departments are now experimenting with ways to overcome these problems. A new approach to police work, known as *community policing*, promises to reverse these trends, by making that the police will be more responsive to the needs of the people they serve. This is to be accomplished through organizational changes which open departments to public input concerning their priorities and procedures, and couples that with a broad, problem-solving orientation toward the issues which emerge from the process.

Community policing is not a clear concept, for it involves reforming organizational decision-making processes rather than being a particular tactical plan. It follows the following general principles:

— Community policing assumes a commitment to broadly focused, problem-oriented policing.
— Community policing relies upon organizational decentralization and a reorientation of patrol in order to open informal, two-way channels of communication between police and citizens.
— Community policing requires that police are responsive to citizen demands when they decide what local problems are and set their priorities.
— Community policing implies a commitment to helping neighborhoods solve crime problems on their own, through crime prevention programs.

Elements of community policing now are observable wherever police innovation is taking place. However, there is little systematic evidence that the premises of community policing are true. To examine these premises, the city of Houston, Texas, participated in an evaluation project. Police there instituted programs designed to test the effectiveness of community policing. The community policing experiment in Houston focused upon improving contacts

between ordinary citizens and the police. A planning group devised several new programs to do this, including a decentralized police office, new forms of routine patrol which would increase their contact with ordinary citizens, and an experiment in organizing communities for crime prevention.

The areas in Houston in which these programs were conducted were racially and ethnically mixed. Each had a population of about 5,000 persons. Police officials and a research team picked the program neighborhoods and selected a comparison area for use in the evaluation. Data was collected before the programs began, and again after about one year. The evaluation indicated that the programs had some positive effects, but they did little to narrow the gap between the attitudes of whites and racial minorities.

The Community Station

Three programs were evaluated in Houston. The first was a small community police station (somewhat like a Japanese *koban*). The program team located space in a small commercial building with good parking (a must in Houston). The office provided a place for people to meet with police. Officers took crime reports and gave and received information from the public, and some community meetings were held there. Officers assigned to the station were freed from routine patrol for much of their daily shift. The office was to be their base of operations for getting acquainted with neighborhood residents and business people, identifying and helping solve local problems, seeking ways of delivering better service to the area, and developing programs to draw the police and community closer together. The staff quickly developed programs which extended into the immediate neighborhood, including a series of large community meetings in a nearby church. Station officers organized special patrols in area trouble-spots, and they met regularly with local school administrators. Area churches and civic clubs were invited to select members to ride with officers patrolling in the neighborhood. Finally, on five occasions during the evaluation period the station staff distributed approximately 550 newsletters throughout the neighborhood. The newsletters advertised the station's programs and other community events, and printed articles about crime prevention.

The station provided a direct test of several aspects of community policing. It provided the officers who ran it a great deal of management autonomy, and flexibility in allocating their own time and effort. They responded by developing community-oriented programs which were virtually unheard of in Houston's police department, and they invented a variety of new ways in which police and citizens could meet and exchange information and discuss their priorities (cf. Wycoff and Skogan, 1987).

The Community Organizing Team

The Community Organizing Response Team (CORT) attempted to create a local crime prevention organization in a neighborhood where none existed. The team's immediate goal was to identify a group of residents who would work regularly with them to define and help solve neighborhood problems. Its long-term goal was to create a permanent organization in the community, one that would remain active after CORT left the area. To test the CORT concept, the task

force first tried to become familiar with the area's problems. To do this they conducted their own door-to-door survey of the neighborhood. CORT members quizzed approximately 300 residents about problems which they felt merited police attention, and whether they might be willing to host meetings in their homes. The survey told them a great deal about the nature of area problems, and resulted in a few invitations to hold such meetings. They then organized small meetings to introduce themselves to area residents. Thirteen neighborhood meetings were held, each attended by 20–60 people. At these meetings CORT members identified a group of leaders who met regularly with their commander to discuss community problems and devise solutions involving both the police and residents. The group eventually held elections and formed committees, and by the end of the evaluation period had sixty official members. During the evaluation period special newsletters were mailed each month to all residents who had been contacted in the survey or who had participated in an activity.

The CORT program tested the ability of police departments to assist in the development of community self-help organizations.

Home Visits

This program was to help Houston patrol officers to become more familiar with the residents of their areas and to learn about neighborhood problems. Officers in one of the experimental areas were freed from routine patrol assignments for part of each daily shift. During this time they visited households in the area. Typically, officers in the program would visit an apartment building or a group of homes, introduce themselves to whoever answered, explained the purpose of the visit, and inquired about neighborhood problems. They recorded these on a small 'citizen contact card', along with the name and address of the person they interviewed. The officers left personal business cards, indicating that if there were further problems they should be contacted directly. A record of these visits was kept at the district police station, to guide further contacts. It also served as a mailing list for a newsletter tailored for the area, which was distributed each month to those who had been contacted. During the ten months of the program, team officers talked to approximately 14 per cent of the adult residents of the area. Visits also were made to commercial establishments in the area, and after 10 months about 45 per cent of the merchants had been contacted.

About 60 per cent of the people that were interviewed had something to complain about. Conventional crimes were most frequently mentioned, but about one-quarter of the residents mentioned a problem which might fall into the disorder category, including disputes among neighbors, environmental problems, abandoned cars, and vandalism. The officers took numerous actions in response to problems they identified during these visits.

Visibility and Impact of the Programs

The programs in Houston were evaluated using a quasi-experimental design. Each program was conducted in a different area, while another matched area was designated as a control area where no new policing programs were begun. To assess how visible the community policing programs were, surveys were

conducted in the program and control areas before the programs began and again after they had been in operation for 10 months. Interviews were conducted with 400–550 residents of each area.

The results of the surveys were as follows. The highest level of recognition went to the storefront office; 65 per cent of those living in that program area knew about it. In the other two areas program officers made actual personal contacts with a modest proportion of those interviewed later in the surveys: about 12 per cent of respondents in the home visit area recalled being visited, and in the CORT area, meeting attendance was 11 per cent and awareness that community meetings were being held stood at 32 per cent. The CORT survey and this also showed up in these measures of program visibility.

The impact of the programs could also be measured using the surveys. Among the immediate targets of the program were disorder and fear. Public perceptions of the extent of social disorder were measured by combining responses to seven questions about public drinking, gang activity, truancy from school, drug sales, and the like. Perceptions of physical disorder were measures by questions about abandoned cars, auto and residential vandalism, graffiti, and dirty streets and sidewalks. Fear of crime was measured by responses to questions about robbery and assault, and fear of nearby places. Satisfaction with the area as a place to live was gauged by combining responses to questions about whether the area was getting better or worse and about satisfaction with living there. Finally, satisfaction with police services was measured by responses to six questions concerning how good a job the police seemed to be doing at various tasks.

The impact of the disorder reduction program on these measures was judged statistically, controlling for many other factors. The most important control factors were the respondents' pre-program scores — their level of fear, etc. — before the programs began. Table 1 summarizes the results of the evaluation. In Table 1, and 'up' or 'down' entry indicates that differences between the program and comparison areas were statistically significant; a '+' or '−' denoted the direction of a statistically insignificant effect.

Table 1. Program Outcomes in Houston

Outcome Measure	Home Visits	Station	Organizing
physical disorder	down	down	down
social disorder	down	−	down
fear of crime	−	down	−
area satisfaction	up	+	up
police performance	up	+	up

Table 1 points to modest program successes. The projects seemed most successful at attacking disorder. The other measures all pointed to some success, and none of the programs seemed to have any adverse effects on area residents. Neighborhood satisfaction and satisfaction with police service went up in home visit and CORT areas. However, fear of crime went down signifi-

cantly only in the storefront area. These results were featured in the government's report on the program.

However, there was an important problem with the projects which was not emphasized in official reports. The evaluation found that the benefits of the program were not equally shared by residents of the target areas. Instead, the programs were successful only in contacting whites and more affluent residents of the areas, and they were the only residents who reported any positive benefits from the program.

Table 2. Differential Program Effects by Race

Outcome Measure	Home Visits	Station	Organizing
	whites	whites	whites
physical disorder			
social disorder		better	better
fear of crime		better	better
area satisfaction	better	better	better
satisfied with police		better	
	owners	owners	owners
physical disorder		better	better
social disorder		better	
fear of crime			better
area satisfaction	better	better	better
satisfied with police	better		

Note: 'better' indicates a statistically significant improvement only for the subgroup living in the program area. All analyses control for ten social and demographic factors and wave 1 levels of the outcome measures.

The problem is described in Table 2. It summarizes an analysis identifying any special program effects that were reserved for just some area residents. Where a 'better' outcome is indicated, there was statistical evidence that some residents were better off than others (e.g., less fearful, more satisfied) after the program went into effect. Especially for the storefront and the CORT program, the effects of the program were largely confined to whites and homeowners in the program areas. These findings do not mean that things got worse for their counterparts (blacks, Hispanics, and renters); rather, their scores simply remained the same. In many instances the positive effects of the program were reserved for whites and homeowners; the better-off got better off, and cleavages between area residents grew deeper. Satisfaction with policing also followed this pattern.

The differential program contacts and effects described here are not unusual. It is often the case that the home owners and long-term residents of a community profit more easily from programs (see Skogan, 1990), and social interventions of a variety of kinds have led to outcomes which differ by race and class. The lack of positive program effects for those at the bottom of the social hierarchy was in part related to their more limited awareness of the programs: in many instances blacks and renters were less familiar with the programs and recalled fewer contacts with them. Whites and home owners were more likely to recall that the police came to their door, to be aware of community meetings,

and to have called or visited the storefront office. The differential program awareness and impact documented here may have been the result of how the programs were run. The community station relied on established civic organizations to attract residents to station programs and to nominate candidates for meeting with police, and neighborhood groups were used to organize the monthly community meetings. This approach appears to have worked well for members of those groups, but blacks and renters were less likely to be members. The CORT program held almost all of its meetings in the part of its target area dominated by owner-occupied single-family homes. The officers conducting home visits could only talk to those who wanted to.

These findings suggest that the theoretical underpinnings of community policing may need to be reexamined. Albert Reiss suggested years ago that community-based policing may not be appropriate where people are divided into competing groups along race and class line. The police are likely to get along best with the factions that share their outlook. In heterogeneous neighborhoods, poor residents easily can become the *targets* of programs. Equitable community policing may depend upon a degree of homogeneity and consensus which does not exist in many troubled neighborhoods.

Appendix

The Thirty-Five Neighborhood Study

The 35 neighborhoods examined here are located in seven US cities. *Table A* lists the cities and some basic features of the questionnaires sharing a common core of items. *Figures 1–4* are based on these surveys.

Table A

City	Surveys		Interviews		Neighborhoods		Programs Evaluated
	wave 1	wave 2	wave 1	wave 2	wave 1	wave 2	
Houston	1983	1984	2251	1294	5	4	home visits storefront office community organizing
Newark	1983	1984	2013	960	5	3	home visits storefront office foot patrol intensive enforcement
Baltimore	1986	1987	842	599	6	6	foot patrol problem oriented policing
Madison	1987	1990	1166	727	10	10	storefront office
Birmingham	1988	1989	580	438	3	3	home visits storefront office intensive enforcement
Oakland	1988	1989	784	502	4	4	home visits intensive enforcement
Denver	1990	1990	519	417	2	2	intensive enforcement

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Wycoff, Mary Ann, and Wesley G. Skogan. 1987. 'Storefront Police Offices: The Houston Field Test', in Dennis Rosenbaum (ed.), *Preventing Crime in Residential and Commercial Areas*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 179–199.