A Qualitative Analysis of Community Policing in the United States

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Abstract

This article determines whether community policing has led to police effectiveness in serving and protecting the American people. The article includes a description of community policing and a discussion of the historical foundation and framework of community policing. In addition, this article examines the impact of community policing on traditional police functions and strategy focusing on three key elements of community policing that are believed to have led to change in traditional police functions and strategy under community policing. Furthermore, the article assesses community policing and finds it to be an effective policing strategy in the United States partly because of its emphasis on dealing with the underlying causes of crime rather than attacking the symptoms of crime. Thus, community policing has enabled the police to be effective in serving and protecting the American people.

Introduction

Community policing is the latest model of policing in the United States. And it is a topic of great interest to political leaders and policy makers at all levels of government, and to police managers and administrators, as well as to police researchers. It involves a great deal of interaction between the police and the citizens in the community in a positive way and in a common effort to prevent and control crime. Its ultimate goal is to improve the quality of life in the community. And some of its objectives are to prevent and reduce crime, reduce fear of crime, improve the physical condition of the community, and increase feelings of safety among community members. Community policing, therefore, is a philosophy of policing based on the idea that – if the police and citizens in the community work together in creative ways to fight and prevent crime, then crime-related problems of the community would be solved, fear of crime would be reduced, community residents would feel safer, and the physical conditions as well as the quality of life in the community would be better.

Thus, community policing involves collaborative efforts between the police and community members to solve community problems in order to control crime and disorder in the communities across the United States. As Sparrow put it, "The concept of community policing envisages a police department striving for an absence of crime and disorder and concerned with, and sensitive to, the quality of life in the community" (1988, p. 397). According to Sparrow, under community policing, the community is perceived as an agent and partner in promoting security rather than as a passive audience. As noted by Sparrow, "This is in contrast to the traditional concept of policing that measures its success chiefly through response times, the number of calls handled, and detection rates for serious crimes" (p. 397).

Under community policing, however, the police must assume new roles and also carry out their duties and responsibilities in ways that are quite different from the traditional model. As stated by Trojanowicz, Kappeler, and Gaines (2002), "In addition to being law enforcers, they must also serve as advisors, facilitators, and supporters of new community-based initiatives. The police must begin to see themselves as part of the community rather than separate from the community" (pp. 1-2). Thus, community policing requires the police to find new ways to promote cooperation between community members and the police in order to facilitate communication and information gathering, as well as effective problem-solving activities. Without intelligence, the police cannot efficiently and effectively solve crimes and other social problems of the community. So, in order to establish a good relationship with community members, some police departments engage in information-gathering activities to collect information about citizen attitudes toward crime problems as well as information about police effectiveness in handling community problems.

Whereas, other police departments choose to collect information from community members by holding town or neighborhood meetings or by regularly meeting with different groups in the community, including minority and business groups (Trojanowicz et al., 2002, p. 6).

Information from citizens in the community is very helpful to the police in their efforts to set goals and priorities and accomplish their tasks efficiently and effectively. As noted by Trojanowicz et al. (2002, p. 6-7), "Survey information can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of police programs in terms of fear reduction or attitudes toward the police. They also gauge citizen behavior such as victimization or crime prevention efforts."

However, before the emergence of community policing, the old view of the police was that – the police were the community's professional defense against crime and disorder. According to this view, citizens were supposed to leave control of crime and maintenance of order for the police (Kelling, 1988). However, the emergence of community policing brought a new view of the police and a new police strategy. This new view is: the police is a partner with citizens in the effort to prevent and fight crime and maintain order in the community. Therefore, community policing involves coproduction, whereby the police and citizens work together to make the neighborhoods safer and more attractive. Accordingly, the police must play a leading role in protecting neighborhoods with serious crime problems – "where, for example predators like drug dealers take over and openly and outrageously deal drugs and threaten citizens" (Kelling, 1988).

Trojanowicz and Carter (1999) have suggested that community policing is the most appropriate model of policing for dealing with the problems associated with the increasing diversity of contemporary American society. They note that the complexity of the makeup of American society brought about by a high level of religious, racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity has "significant implications for law enforcement, particularly because many of the legal and illegal immigrants flooding into this country are of different races, ethnic groups, religion, and cultures. Many do not have even a rudimentary knowledge of the English language" (p. 365).

The Emergence of Community Policing

The professional model of policing in the United States, also known as the traditional model of policing, was institutionalized in the early 1900s. Specifically, it was the model of policing in America from 1920 to1970. Under the professional model of policing, the relationship between the police and the citizens in the community was not close mainly because the police chose to separate themselves from community residents they were supposed to serve and protect. In other words, the police distanced themselves from community members thereby limiting interaction between the police and citizens. The idea of maintaining separation between the police and citizens in the communities came from police administrators then, who believed that police officers would be professional in the manner in which they interacted with citizens, if they were separated from citizens in the communities. During that period of time, police administrators believed that maintaining separation between the police and the community residents was the way to greatly reduce the two significant problems that the police faced during the political era of policing (1840-1920) prior to the adoption of the professional model of policing: corruption and political intervention into police affairs. As a consequence, the separation strategy led to police ineffectiveness in serving and protecting the people they were sworn to protect.

So under the professional model of policing, the relationship between the police and the citizens was characterized by alienation. The relationship worsened in the 1960s with the civil disturbances that occurred throughout much of the nation, particularly in big cities. The intensification of the civil rights movement during the 1960s precipitated civil unrest in many minority communities largely because of their skepticism of the police and the paucity of economic opportunities available to them. As a result, almost every major city in the United States experienced a major riot during the 1960s (Gaines, Kappeler, and Vaughn,1997).

Moreover, the actions that the police took in dealing with the civil disturbances demonstrated a   lack of skills and ability on their part to handle the social unrest facing the nation. In fact, most of the riots and disorder started as a result of police action. As Gaines et al. put it, "the police in their pursuit of professionalism, had lost touch with citizens they were sworn to protect. In many cases, when civil disorder occurred, the police did not have intelligence, nor did they comprehend that the disorders were imminent" (1997, p. 61). Because the police were incapable of handling the social unrest effectively due primarily to the philosophy and strategy of the professional model of policing, a substantial body of research that began in the 1970s raised questions about the effectiveness of the professional model of policing. Consequently, police leaders began to look for a new philosophy and strategy for a more effective policing (Trojanowicz et al., 2002, p. 4).

As a result, community policing was initiated out of frustrations and disenchantment with the traditional police strategy to replace the professional model of policing. Dissatisfaction with the professional model was brought about by the fact that it proved to be an ineffective police strategy for dealing with the civil disorder facing the nation during the 1960s; and by the evidence that the key elements of the model such as rapid response, the specialization of detective work, and the deterrence effects of both visible patrol and arresting suspects were not effective in reducing the crime rate (Skogan, 2004, p. xxx).

Therefore, in an effort to bring the crime situation under control, the federal government enacted the Omnibus Crime Control Act of 1968. Under the Act, the federal government made available a substantial amount of money for state and local police and other criminal justice agencies. A significant portion of the funds was used to purchase equipment, provide training, and improve programs in policing. Funds were also utilized to develop programs aimed at improving relations between the police and the public. In fact, most big city police departments established units or divisions of police-community relations with the aim of improving relations and increasing interaction between the police and the public (Gaines et al., 1997). This spawned new police-community relations, which reflected a shift in police strategy and practices. As a result, many police departments began to decentralize decision making and planning for operations. Thus, authority was given to precinct and district commanders by many police departments to develop programs to provide better services to citizens, as many police administrators began to emphasize the necessity to respect citizens' rights and the obligation of the police to treat citizens respectfully as human beings (Gaines et al., 1997, p. 61).

During the 1980s, however, community policing evolved from community-police relations into a new model of policing (Gaines et al., 1997; Trojanowicz and Bucqueroux, 1998; Gaines and Kappeler, 2003). According to Trojanowicz and Buqueroux, "By the early 1980s, a number of new names had appeared regarding police-community relations: Neighborhood-Oriented Policing, Community-Oriented Policing, Community Policing. Over time, the simplest term prevailed, and community policing was born" (1998, p. 4).

In 1994, the U.S. Congress passed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, which provided funds for hiring 100,000 new police officers and allocated approximately $11 billion dollars to American law enforcement. Another important provision of the 1994 Crime Act was "to foster problem solving and interaction with communities by police officers, that is, to encourage and accelerate transitions to community policing by police agencies throughout the country" (Skogan, 2004, p. 3). The 1994 Crime Act was the statutory basis for the creation of the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS). The Act authorized the COPS Office to spend $9 billion on grants to state, local, and other public law enforcement agencies and on supporting functions. According to Skogan (2004, p. 3), "These functions included training and technical assistance in community policing through the Community Policing Consortium; forging partnerships among police, researchers, and community residents through a network of regional community policing institutes." Furthermore, as noted by Skogan, the COPS Office encouraged compliance with grant requirements as well as the requirement to implement community policing (p.3). Thus, the 1994 Crime Act not only provided the funds for hiring 100,000 police officers in order to increase police presence in the communities, but it also sought to advance community policing throughout the nation. In its 2000 report to the U.S. Congress, the COPS Office stated: "That is exactly what has happened – with over 87 percent of the country now served by departments that practice community policing" (p. 39). The following section discusses how community policing has impacted traditional police functions and strategy.

The Impact of Community Policing on Traditional Police Functions and Strategy

Community policing has expanded the traditional police functions, and has caused the police to change their traditional reactive strategy for dealing with crime problems in the community. This section analyzes the three key elements of community policing: refocused police strategy, partnership with citizens, and problem solving – that have led to change in traditional police strategy and to the expansion of traditional police functions.

Refocused Police Strategy

The professional model of policing involved the traditional police strategy or approach to dealing with crime and disorder in the community, which was basically reactive. This means that the police focused primarily on fighting crime without much attention to crime prevention.

Consequently, the traditional police response to crime and disorder problems in the community consisted of random, routine patrols, which the police believed would deter crime through an unexpected police presence. The police also believed that if random, routine patrol failed to prevent crime, then police officers working their beats should be able to prevent criminal activity and apprehend criminals.

And, if the beat officers were unsuccessful in apprehending the criminals, then detectives would be dispatched to the community to investigate the crimes and make arrests (Gaines and Kappeler, 2003, p. 481). To accomplish the goal of fighting crime, the police invested large amounts of resources in automobiles, telephones, radios, and new computer technologies.

The traditional reactive strategy involved centralized police operations and responding to calls for service when disorder and/or crime occurred in the community. Such a strategy isolated the police from the citizens in the community because the police for the most part would come to the community to deal with crime or disorder situations only when called by the citizens. Kelling (1988, p. 90), provides an example of how the traditional reactive approach to crime in the community can play out: a concerned and frightened citizen calls police about a neighbor husband and wife who are fighting. Police come and intervene. They might separate the couple, urge them to get help, or, if violence has occurred, arrest the perpetrator. But basically, police try to resolve the incident and get back to the patrol cars so they are available for the next call.

Responding to calls from citizens for police service proved to be an ineffective way of dealing with crime and disorder in the community because no matter how rapid the responses were, responding to calls from citizens involved after-the-fact responses to crime. And, for this reason, the traditional reactive police strategy was severely criticized. Subsequently, this criticism became one of the major reasons for the demise of the professional model of policing, and for the emergence of community policing.

Thus, community policing has refocused police strategy for dealing with crime and disorder in the community from reactive to proactive by including efforts to prevent crime and disorder by attempting to determine the causes of crime and disorder in the community. This means that the police must not wait to be called, but must endeavor to identify and confront crime and disorder problems with the aim of solving them. This proactive strategy, however, must be combined with the good aspects of the traditional approach, such as investment in equipment and new computer technologies, as well as in crime-fighting efforts. So community policing combines both reactive and proactive strategies for policing the communities in the United States. Accordingly, police presence in the community must be increased in order to foster greater interaction between the police and the citizens for the purpose of effective crime prevention and control. Thus, community policing requires the police to increase their use of foot patrol, directed patrol, door-to-door policing, and other alternatives to traditional motorized patrol (Cordner, 1995, p. 503). Moreover, the police are also required to focus not only on serious crimes, but also on minor offenses, disorder, and incivilities, which can increase the level of crime in a community (Gaines and Kappeler, 2003, p. 481). All of these discussed above show that community policing has substantially refocused police strategy from essentially reactive to essentially proactive. And has also led to the expansion of traditional police functions through its other two key elements: problem-solving and partnerships with citizens both of which will be discussed next.

Partnership with Citizens

Partnership with citizens involves cooperation and coordination between the police and the community allowing the community to participate in its own protection from crime and disorder. Partnership with citizens is necessitated by the fact that the police cannot effectively combat crime and disorder by themselves without the active participation and commitment on the part of citizens in efforts to prevent and reduce crime and disorder in their communities. The aim is to engage community members in efforts aimed at crime prevention and crime fighting. The police role is to assist community members in developing and maintaining the ability to control crime in their neighborhoods. This may require the police to identify community leaders, such as civic and religious leaders, and work with them to build a safer neighborhood. Essentially, the police become a catalyst in the development of community projects such as neighborhood watch programs, neighborhood revitalization projects, and youth-oriented educational and recreational programs. Citizens on their part may become involved as volunteers, reserves, or auxillaries on an individual basis or as groups in the collaborative effort with the police (Cordner, 1995, p. 505).

Furthermore, partnership with citizens requires the police to include citizen input regarding community safety in police planning and decision making processes. As noted earlier, the police have developed a number of different ways to collect citizen input, including community surveys and neighborhood meetings. According to Skogan, "Citizen input can help ensure that police activities are consistent with local values and needs.

It also increases police accountability and responsiveness, and helps police officers maintain legitimacy in the community" (2004, p. 209). Moreover, partnership with citizens is believed to result in mutual benefits for the police and the community. On the one hand, it enables the police to protect and serve the community more effectively. On the other hand, it gives community members a greater feeling of security for their lives and property because of their awareness of the strategies put in place to effectively deal with crime and disorder in the community.

Problem Solving

Problem solving involves police efforts to aid community members in determining causes of crime and disorder in their communities as well as to help them develop and assess strategies for dealing with those causes of crime and disorder on an immediate and long-term basis. Problem solving focuses on dealing with the root causes of crime and disorder in the community in order to eliminate them or to reduce their influence on crime. Consequently, "community policing moves departments beyond the reactive stance of waiting for calls for service or citizen complaints to a more proactive mode, addressing problems before they occur and attacking the underlying causes of crime" (Grant and Terry, 2012, p. 220).

Part of the police role in problem solving includes: (1) giving advice and encouragement to city officials to demolish abandoned buildings that can be used or are being used by criminals to market illegal drugs, (2) to clean up the community by getting rid of junk vehicles and abandoned property, (3) to strictly enforce alcohol and disorder laws in and around bars and taverns, especially those bars and taverns that experience high levels of disorder. Additionally, police role in problem solving includes giving advice to community members on how to protect their property with fences, security lights, and other private security equipments (Trojanowicz et al., 2002, p. 16). Moreover, problem solving requires the police to act as a liaison between the citizens in the community and the governmental and nongovernmental organizations that can play a role in solving social, economic, and health problems on individual and community levels. Accordingly, the police become particularly concerned with the problems of dysfunctional families, juveniles, minorities, the poor, the homeless, the mentally-ill, and disabled persons. Thus, problem solving involves the collaborative efforts of the police and entities in the community to identify and solve not only crime and disorder problems, but also social, economic, and health problems that influence crime (Trojanowicz et al., 2002). The next section offers a qualitative assessment of community policing in the United States.

Evaluations of Community Policing

Generally, community policing in the United States has been recognized as a successful policing strategy by political leaders and policy makers, police researchers, and the law enforcement community. It is also widely believed that community policing has to a large extent achieved its ultimate goal, which is to improve the quality of life in the communities across the nation. It has done that through some of its objectives, which are: to prevent and reduce crime, reduce the fear of crime, improve the physical condition of the community, and increase the feelings of safety among community members. Most political leaders at all levels of government credit community policing with their successes in reducing crime in their jurisdictions, and in improving the relationship between the police and members of their respective communities. In fact, the former U.S. Attorney General, Janet Reno, made significant evaluative statements about community policing in the United States in the 2000 Attorney General's Report to Congress. In the report, the former Attorney General stated among other things that:

Crime has dropped to its lowest level since 1968, as police officers work hand-in-hand with the community forging new partnerships and working together to solve problems. By walking a beat and sharing in the life of neighborhoods, thousands of community oriented policing officers funded by the COPS program are redefining the relationship between law enforcement and the community. As community members get to know the person behind the badge, and police officers learn the hopes and fears of the residents they serve, perceptions change. Trust grows. New and creative ways of dealing with long-standing problems are developed. Unique partnerships are developed among groups and organizations where previously there was skepticism or even hostility.

Crime decreases, the fear of crime decreases, and neighborhoods thrive. (2000, p. iii)

Most of the police administrators interviewed by this author in 2010 responded affirmatively to the question: Do you believe that community policing played a significant role in police efforts to prevent and reduce the crime rate in your city, from 2005-2009? The responses of two out of the five interviewees from the 2010 interview will be presented here.

First, in his response, the Support Service Commander of the Greenville Police Department in Greenville, Mississippi, who was in charge of the city's community-policing programs, stated that community policing played a significant role in preventing and reducing crime in Greenville, Mississippi. The commander also stated that the relationship between the police and the community had improved tremendously over the past seven to ten years due to several community policing, crime-prevention initiatives, such as COPS initiative, the Project Safe Neighborhoods initiative, Enhanced Policing Capabilities initiative, by way of the Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) programs, as well as the city of Greenville's Neighborhood Watch programs. According to the commander, these programs mentioned above, were put in place as a consequence of the extremely high crime rate through the years up to 2003. Furthermore, the commander stated emphatically that the sharp decrease in crime in the city of Greenville, Mississippi, from 2004 to 2009, was due to the implementation of the city's community policing initiatives (Support Service Commander, Greenville Police Department, Greenville, Mississippi, 2010).

Second, the Assistant Chief of Police of the Grenada Police Department in Grenada, Mississippi, who also was in charge of the city's community policing programs, stated in his own response, that community policing has had a decreasing effect on the crime rate of the city of Grenada, Mississippi. The Assistant Chief added that 2009 showed a marked decrease in several of the benchmark measurable crimes. According to the Assistant Chief, even though the decrease in crime was not evenly spread throughout the city, there was no significant increase in crime in any area within the city.

Furthermore, the Assistant Chief stated that the willingness of the police officers of the Greenville Police Department to embrace the concept of community policing and practice it on a daily basis produced these results, According to the Assistant Chief, "Officers now understand that they have to get out of their police vehicles and "work" the public to attain positive feedback, pertinent information and positive results. It leads to a "win-win" situation for all parties" (Assistant Chief of Police, Greenville Police Department, Greenville, Mississippi, 2010). Essentially, the responses of these two police administrators, who were in charge of the community policing programs of their respective cities, indicate that when a police department embraces community policing (as most police departments in the United States have) as its policing strategy, thereby deeply involving its officers in community policing efforts, community policing becomes an effective policing strategy. The responses also show that the more robust a city's community policing programs/activities are, the greater the effectiveness of community policing with respect to crime reduction.

Moreover, as noted by George Cole and Christopher Smith, the crime rate in the United States declined from the 1990s through the early years of the twenty-first century (2010, p. 27). Additionally, the 2009 crime statistics released by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) showed that the estimated number of violent crimes in the United States declined for the third consecutive year; and that property crimes also declined in 2009 "marking the seventh straight year that the collective estimates for these offenses dropped below the previous year's total" (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2009).

Because crime is a complex social phenomenon, it is difficult to point to specific factors that cause an increase or decrease in crime rates (Cole and Smith, 2010, p. 38). However, most recent evaluations of community policing have produced evidence that indicate that community policing is achieving its objectives, including lower crime rates. By dealing with the underlying causes of crime rather than attacking the symptoms of crime, community policing has for the most part been proven to be an effective policing strategy in the United States.

Conclusions

Community policing as stated above, is the latest model of policing in America, and it is very popular among politicians, citizens, and the law enforcement community. It is perhaps the most appropriate model of policing in an increasingly diverse society like the United States. It emerged mostly from disenchantment with the reactive strategy of policing, and the recognition on the part of police researchers and police administrators that an alternative strategy can be found to make the police effective in serving and protecting the people they were sworn to protect.

Community policing offers the police greater flexibility in their response to community crime and disorder problems in ways that foster greater interaction and cooperation between the police and community members. It allows personalized and decentralized police service, and seeks to discover innovative ways to reduce and prevent crime.

Moreover, community policing has significantly expanded and changed the professional model of policing in America through its three key elements: refocused police strategy, partnership with citizens, and problem solving. Accordingly, community policing involves a variety of programs designed to attack crime and disorder problems in the community in order to make the community safer and more orderly.   Its problem solving philosophy requires the police to identify the root causes of crime and disorder problems, and to develop strategies – with input from community members – for optimal solutions to community crime and disorder problems. As a result, the police must be creative and also be willing to consider nontraditional responses to community crime and disorder problems. Thus, the police must be concerned with social problems in the community and must pay special attention to individuals in the community that are at risk of being victims of crime or being involved in criminal activity.

To be sure, community policing works. It combines both reactive and proactive approaches to policing, and thus has helped police organizations in the United States to be effective in serving and protecting the American people. Because of its three key elements mentioned above, community policing is an effective policing strategy for preventing and combating crime, reducing fear of crime, and improving the overall quality of life in communities across the United States.

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