Problems and Policy Implications of Community Policing

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In recent years, there has been a shift towards “community policing” as a way of trying to lower crime rates and work with community residents to focus on specific problems within the community. The Community Oriented Policing Services website defines community policing as “proactive problem solving in a systematic and routine fashion. Rather than responding to crime only after it occurs, community policing encourages agencies to proactively develop solutions to the immediate underlying conditions contributing to public safety problems” (COPS). However, the definition can vary across police departments. While community policing has tried to be implemented across the country, there are many problems that come with this new policing tactic, including difficulty defining what community policing is, defining what the “community” is, and how it affects different races and genders.

The An Introduction to Policing textbook states that many believe community policing originated from James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling’s article in the *Atlantic Monthly,* that was titled “Broken Windows’: The Police and Neighborhood Safety”. Essentially, community policing falls under a new perspective titled new criminal justice. New criminal justice, coined by Klofas, Hipple and McGarrell in 2010 shifts the issue of crime from a primarily criminal justice system problem to a collective society’s problem. Ergo, crime may affect each component of a society in some way, shape or form, and therefore must work in unison to fix specific community problems (Dempsey, 2015). Community policing is also defined as being made up of two different components: problem-oriented policing and prevention-oriented approaches. Law enforcement agencies are expected to communicate effectively with their community to identity specific problems citizens have prioritized (Hartnett & Skogan, 1997). These problems are more often than not go beyond the standard incident reported to the police. Instead, citizens are focused on “threatening and fear-provoking” conditions such as poverty and social disorganization (Harnett & Skogan, 1997). By doing so, police officers take a preventative or proactive approach with community agents to resolve the problems they are given. In theory, problems will decrease, and future opportunities or motives to commit offenses will cease to even exist. Wilson and Kelling state that “disorder in neighborhoods creates fear...certain neighborhoods send out “signals” that encourage crime…[and] community policing is essential.” They also argue that police must use the citizen’s support and assistance if they want to reduce fear and fight crime (Wilson & Kelling, 1982). In 1983, Robert Trojanowicz founded the National Center for Community Policing. He believed that community policing can play a vital role in reducing individual violence, civil unrest and police brutality within communities.

Perhaps the biggest problem with community policing is the definition in itself. Although 53% of law enforcement agencies across the United States have incorporated community policing into their mission statements, there is some confusion as to what the term entails (Kappler & Gaines, 2011). Specifically, there is debate over what methods constitute community policing and, if so, which ones to implement towards an individual community (Kappler & Gaines, 2011). For example, law enforcement in urban areas may see the traditional practice of foot patrols in a given area as community policing, whereas other law enforcement agencies in suburban areas deem citizen programs as the only necessary form. Varying definitions cause further concern when the community’s version of community policing does not match with the law enforcement agency. Police departments may use tactics that seem to be the complete opposite of what is included in their mission statement, leading to confusion about the department’s service and dedication towards a community (Kappler & Gaines, 2011). Thus, law enforcement practices may lead to the complete opposite of improved community relations. The essence of community policing may also cause conflict within law enforcement agencies. Proponents of traditional policing, grounded in the ways of pure arrests to fix a community’s problems, will clash with advocates of community policing, which focus on problem-oriented approaches to improve a community while at the same time sustaining a positive relation with particular groups (Kappler & Gaines, 2011). A case study of the Seattle Police Department found that in addition to no money being given to the agency with regards to community policing, the police union rejected any reformation in deadly force policy; a policy that the community directly proposed to the police department (Reed, 1999). If not implemented and approved by all members of a law enforcement agency, community policing will only be a definition rather than a course of action.

Along with the problem of defining community policing, there is also discrepancy with defining what the “community” is. Community policing cannot function the proper way it’s designed to if the community is not fully involved. If the community is not working hand in hand with the police, how would law enforcement agencies implement policing within the community? There is also a problem if only half the community, say one particular group based on status or race, cooperates because then community policing would only benefit those interested. One of the biggest controversies of community policing is how much power safety-oriented groups like Neighborhood watch should have. After the case of the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin by Neighborhood Watch captain George Zimmerman, the level of involvement for these groups have been questioned. Although police departments want to see citizen participation and support for public safety, they do not want to see such groups take the law into their own hands (Rubinkam, 2012). However, when crime waves start to rise in a community, Rubinkam (2012) notes that citizens may feel urged to play the role of vigilante. “Duty-bound” citizens who feel that their community or personal safety is at risk might use inappropriate use of force, justified by “Stand Your Ground” laws. These laws allow residents to use deadly force “if he or she reasonably believes it is necessary to do so to prevent death...or prevent the commission of a forcible felony” (Kromm, 2012). However, many cases had strange circumstances that does not seem to be life-threatening conditions, leading to many dubbing “Stand Your Ground” laws as “justifiable homicides” (Kromm, 2012). For community-oriented policing to work, it mostly “relies upon community consent in relation to policing initiatives and operations within communities”. On the police side of this policing tactic, it “requires that police be responsive to citizens’ demands when they decide what local problems are and set their priorities.” (Spalek, 2010) When community involvement opportunities for community policing are offered, another problem could be the citizens just not showing up. Anil Anand (2008) states that “given that almost all participants in community programmes do so on a volunteer basis (unpaid), police organizations must remain sensitive to those conditions (cultural), box external and internal to police departments which help to sustain community policing”. The main argument is, is that to strengthen and maintain community policing, citizens need to be involved and actually show up to the programs that are being offered: otherwise they are pointless. He continues to state, “policing in diverse communities requires a systematic and genuine understanding of the cultural perceptions and values of those who comprise the communities...” This again, strengthens the idea that for community policing to work, the involvement of all parts of the community needs to support it, not just one part of the community. Skogan and Wycoff’s article (1987) shows that community policing program in Houston called “victim callback program”, which was an effort to help victims of crimes, had generally a “negative effect on some minority groups…whose members may have been suspicious of the department’s intentions. The shows that when different parts of the community may not support the community policing efforts, may end up preventing it from working in the way it’s supposed to.

Another problem with community policing, is not with the community but rather with the police officers themselves. According to Skolnick and Bayley (1986), officers who see the world as “us and them” have resisted bettering police-community relations through programming or training and think the community relations from community oriented policing weakens the police community itself. These authors also believe that officers who are against community-oriented policing will result in loss of power for the police department, because they would be associating with citizens who have been seen as receivers of forceful control from the police. Traditional police officers see community-oriented policing as interfering with the traditional role of police: crime fighting. Community policing offers “purposeful and systematic reprioritization of the three core functions by shifting efforts away from...crime control...and giving greater attention to order maintenance and service provision.” (Zhao, He & Lovrich, 2006). This coincides with the fear that officers can have from moving away from the professional policing era. Administrators may have to resort to changing mission statements, policies, and even training modules just to incorporate ideals of community-oriented policing (Stojkovic, 2015). Administrators must also begin to foster positive perceptions of local news outlets and media sources. Many law enforcement officials may feel like news sources portray law enforcement agencies in a negative light by only focusing on civil liberty issues, police brutality cases, or inter agency corruption. Likewise, media groups feel that it is a democratic obligation to their community to present the problems embedded in public, and may develop a critical eye to law enforcement to maintain accountability. Although a challenge, officers and news agencies must put their primary obligation to the community first and find a parallel way to work together for the people (Stojkovic, 2015). Community policing forces officers to get out of their patrol cars, walk beats, and interact with the community residents. While order maintenance and service provision are the most important roles of community policing, it does take away from the traditional role that police officers were seen to have, which can be intimidating to many administrators and policy makers.

Although most of the problems with community stem from the system, there are also problems with how it can affect different groups of people. In regards to the race and community policing, in a study done by Marcos Ong and David A. Jenks (2004), while the overall population’s positive perception of the police increased, most minorities still harbor “less positive perceptions of police”. This study showed that while they had the highest number of community policing activities in their area, the minority groups were still not content with the local police. Disdain towards the general image of policing can also be traced back to many of the race riots throughout the 1960s and the eventual riot following the brutal assault on Rodney King. Studies found that about half of the riots started as a result of negligent and often abusive behavior towards African-American communities in major cities (Hartnett & Skogan, 1997). On the other hand, according to the previous study by Ong and Jenks (2004), Hispanic individuals “embraced the philosophy of community policing.” The author notes that a reason for this could be the strong sense community that they embrace within their own culture. According to Thomas and Burns’ study on police perceptions amongst white, Latino and African American communities, the rhetoric of community policing “means more for white perceptions than it does Latino and African American views toward the police even though it also fulfills its promise to reduce tensions between the police and racial and ethnic minorities (Thomas and Burns, 2005). They further explain that residents who live in minority communities may perceive that the increased police presence around them is “yet another ‘crackdown’ on their community” (Thomas and Burns, 2005). Ergo, while the police may simply be trying to implement community policing and increase foot patrol in particular parts of communities, it could leave a negative perception on the minority groups living within them.

Most police officers in the midwestern city that was analyzed in Gender and Community Policing: Walking the Talk were “frustrated in their move away from the predictable routine of patrol” (Miller, 1999). Officers have to move away from their crime fighting roles and shift more towards being a “neighborhood officer”, as the book puts it. The neighborhoods in the study were not always welcoming to the new officers assigned to their beat, and the new officers “were just as confused about their roles” as well (Miller, 1999). These officers enjoyed the freedom of not longer having to only respond to the radio, but they were intimidated due to their “permanent patrol hours and shifts, set days off’, protocols for quick calls and their own patrol car being taken away (Miller, 1999). According to Miller, community policing also embraces “feminine” qualities, which is important for neighborhood officers to have. Therefore, not only do officers need to make the shift from their traditional role to more of a problem-solving, community-oriented role, they must also shift to having these “feminine” qualities, which could be seen as threatening to a male officer’s masculinity.

Another problem that could stem from community policing, is the idea that corruption that occurred from the older foot patrol system could arise again. In many occasions, police officers get too close with individual community groups, resulting in disproportionate influences. Officers often frequent particular businesses in their line of duty, consequently establishing rapport with owners who may offer discounts or even free items. They then must make a choice of either refusing the incentives, which could be considered rude and diminish the built-up rapport ,or take the perks with possible strings attached such as heightened individual security. If officers choose the latter, they risk opening the gateway into the slippery slope of corruption. What turned into accepting small gifts can lead to bribery and corruption, damaging the ideas of openness and accountability that democratic police forces strive for. The Introduction to Policing textbook poses an important question with this topic: “Are the community policing strategies placing officers in an ambiguous position and perhaps enhancing relationships with (and, consequently, the influence of) one group over another?”.

While there are many downsides and reasons why community policing would not or can not work in certain communities, there are some positive effects and advantages to implementing it within communities. In Purcellville, Virginia, where there are only 7,800 people, the police department wanted to implement the theory “it takes a village to raise a child.” Different programs they used included “basketball games with the youth, public safety days, an end-of-school picnic, homework assistance, a scholarship pageant, and Christmas caroling for the elderly.” (Dempsey, 2015) Although these programs are hard to implement in large scale communities, these seem to work quite well in the small town setting. Because of these programs, there was a “30 percent decrease in domestic reports involving youth, a 60 percent decrease in runaway reports, a 70 percent decrease in incidents of graffiti and a 95 percent decrease in skateboarding complaints” (Dempsey, 2015) So while these illustrate that community policing can be effective for youth, it’s hard to know if these types of programs would work in larger scale cities.

Other programs that can be used to give residents an opportunity in their communities are ones such as “Neighborhood Watch programs, Community Emergency Response Team, and volunteer programs” (Dempsey, 2005). Programs for the youth in the communities can include DARE, Gang Resistance Education and Training and Police Athletic League. However, studies found that programs like DARE actually are very ineffective in preventing youth from engaging in drugs and alcohol when they are older. Police can also work with seniors “in an effort to empower seniors and minimize their fear of crime” (textbook). Obtaining community involvement throughout generations is very important in trying to gain the trust of the community members. However, why are these programs not implemented more in communities across the nation?

Community Oriented Police Services (COPS) has a big influence on community policing across the nation. Created in 1994 under the Department of Justice, the branch tries to implement a national approach towards community policing (Espejo, 2014). The organization stresses “earning the trust of the community and making members of the community stakeholders in their own safety” (Dempsey, 2015). This lets the law enforcement agencies better assess and address the needs of the community. COPS has distributed their funds to three different main initiatives: “providing three-year grants to hire police officers to work in community policing initiatives, awarding grants for improved productivity through acquiring technology or hiring civilians to free sworn-officer time...and awarding grants to agencies for special programs attacking specific crime issues.” (Dempsey, 2015). Espejo (2014) states the impact COPS has had with local law enforcement, as they “funded more than thirteen thousand law enforcement agencies nationwide” and “placing an additional 124,000 officers on the streets”. In 2014, COPS also requested $439.5 million to go towards hiring programs and school safety programs (Espejo, 2014). However, there is some concern is to whether or not the grants have been effective in reducing crime rates. Independent researchers William Evans and Emily Owens examined index crime rates and found that after COPS grants, robberies went down 5%, along with a 3.6% drop in assaults, 3.3% decrease in automobile thefts, 3.2% decline in homicide rates, and burglaries by 2.2% (Espejo, 2014).

On the other hand, the Heritage Foundation’s Center for Data Analysis found that a 1% increase in hiring grants only led to a 0.01 reduction in in robbery rates (Espejo, 2014). This finding may be only one part of the hiring grants’ impact, as only one index crime was taken into the Center’s study. Due to its proactive nature by preventing crime before it even occurs, COPS’s effectiveness is hard in itself to determine. Furthermore, crime rates across the United States were decreasing, which may explain why there was such a small reduction in robberies. Another major problem is that funding towards community policing has decreased due to a shift towards homeland security in recent years. The An Introduction to Policing textbook also states that “some departments have made increased efforts to get back to essential police services” after the September 11th attacks. However, there is an idea circulating that community policing could actually play a vital role in preventing terrorist attacks. By connecting with the community in the way that community policing does, law enforcement agencies could gain important information that could stop these attacks before they occur. Supporters of community policing would say there are many benefits for both the police and the community. The community can help prevent crime by providing information to the police such as identifying offenders and the crime trends. Neil Cameron (1990) states these new strategies will help decrease the fear of crime, “especially among such groups as the elderly, women and ethnic minorities”. He also asserts community policing will empower the community residents to act in their own defense. Another example of a positive outcome of community policing, could be in Newark, New Jersey. The Newark Fear Reduction Experiment had a goal of decreasing fear of crime but increasing contact between the police and the residents of the community which it achieved by focusing on the social disorder in the community. (Cameron, 1990)

Looking at both the advantages and disadvantages, we have come up with a way we think could successfully implement community policing within a community. One of the most notable policy implementations is to focus efforts on hiring recruits from diverse backgrounds. Many subcultures embedded in various communities take an ardent disdain towards police. They see institutional police organizations as intruding into their personal lives, with the sole objective of asserting illegitimate dominance over constituents. Anti-cop language such as “pigs” and “fuzz” are used in negative connotations to describe the uniform, and community members are pressured by societal forces to not cooperate with officers in the occurrence of a crime for fear of ostracization and rejection. Therefore, it is essential to recruit officers from different racial and ethnic backgrounds; backgrounds that most align with the subcultures. Hispanic community resource officers working in predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods will allow residents to see past the uniform to someone they can relate to. In essence, citizens who share a similar culture or background with an officer will lead to more comfortable reporting , in turn developing the trust needed to address specific problems.

Although many schools allow officers to lecture about gang activities and educational drug problems, they rarely discuss the department’s hiring process and incentives of working for a police department. Community resource officers located in schools can take the initiative by presenting the perks of joining and agency and mention why they personally became a police officer. The officers may receive extra attention from students as many of them develop friendships with students, even being seen as positive role models to look up to. However, administrators must shift their efforts away from the traditional school lectures and more towards different community outlets. After-school programs like the Boys and Girls Club of America, Boy/Girl Scouts, and the YMCA, all place a grand emphasis on leadership development, and are pivotal avenues of approach for recruiting officers to focus. Lastly, administrators should literally take recruiting efforts to the streets. It is no revelation that adolescents with no extracurricular activities or after-school care are more susceptible to commit delinquent acts. We believe recruiting officers can approach the group of young kids to distribute flyers, which would list the incentives of being a police officer and programs put on by the department. Ergo, a proactive approach of crime is implemented and potential recruits are in the air.

Convincing police officers to use technology to their advantage is another way community policing could be implemented and be successful. Allowing individual officers or whole departments to create accounts on social media would be a great way for them to reach out to the public. Numerous tweets float around Twitter from various police departments, containing funny things that happened in the community or more serious incidents that occurred. The Boca Raton Police Department was one of the first agencies to use social media to communicate with the public, and has since received positive feedback for their anonymous tip hotline, crime reporting, and natural disaster updates (Alexander, 2011). Either way, having the police interact with the community via Facebook or Twitter can help build trust and bridge the gap between the public and the officers. This could strengthen the trust with younger residents due to the popularity of social media within middle to high school aged youth. Officers can also display an aura of personal service by handing out a business card or business cell phone number to residents he or she encounters. This would be a modification to the community policing model used by Chicagos in the 1990s. Police officers would offer to hand out their pager numbers to interested civilians with the hopes of increasing reporting rates. Likewise, community resource officers can give out their telephone numbers to encourage community members to discuss problems.

Federal actors must also play a role for community policing to succeed across the nation. As stated earlier, police agencies have various discrepancies in their definitions of community policing. Although it is true that different communities have different problems and therefore different methods of community policing, agencies can reach consensus on key terminology that incorporates the idea itself. Institutions such as the National Institute of Justice can create standard guidelines on characteristics of community policing to share to local law enforcement agencies. These characteristics (such as problem-oriented policing and proactive approaches) can then be implemented into the agency’s mission statements, which would give the public an image of a consensual definition.

Much like an administrator has to make sure all of his or her department gets along and settles on the same page, so too must different groups within the community. In order to promote interaction and connection with different community agents, several activities could be implemented. To connect different faiths in a community, a township or county can implement an inter-faith dinner, where several individuals from different places of worship come together to cook different cultural dishes and promote peaceful interaction. Community resource officers can be hired off-duty as security for the event. While maintaining a sense of public security, the officer can also approach different guests to conduct dialogue about different and possible issues a faith is receiving. Interfaith dinners can especially be utilized with areas of hate crime or derogatory vandalism at faith centers. The police can also help improve community relations by conducting humanitarian efforts in the community. Off duty police officers can form seasonal soup kitchens or pantries that provide free meals to the public. The Bethlehem Police Department conducted a similar volunteer effort when they served Thanksgiving dinners to homeless families in the community. In addition, the department collected 2,000 canned goods and over 100 winter coats to distribute throughout the city (Duffy, 2016). Volunteer efforts such as these would not only implement community policing in its purest form, but also create a positive image of a caring police department.

To deal with the lack of funding for implementing community policing, police departments can hosts fundraisers to connect with the community while obtaining funds at the same time. Agencies can hosts cook-offs with local businesses; reputable restaurants in the area can advertise to their customers with door prizes and blue ribbon contests for outstanding cooks. The remainder of food can then be donated to a food pantry or homeless shelter. Police departments can also gain funding through local representatives of federal or state governments. Administrators can invite local politicians such as congressmen, mayors, and city council members to community policing events to gain a first-hand look into positive impacts on the residents. However, some politicians may not see a correlation between crime rates and these events. To prove the relationship, law enforcement agencies can contact and invite police chiefs who have implemented and observed the effects of community policing to their locality. The chiefs can present their findings to local politicians with the aim of increased funding for the program.

Improving police-media relations is also essential to implementing an effective community policing program. Each department should have a public relations officer on hand to present public information regarding arrests, crime waves, and controversial police behavior. This last component is perhaps the most important feature to focus on. Many citizens already hold negative viewpoints towards police officers, especially with police brutality in violations in the use-of-force-continuum. Public relations officers therefore would either explain why the actions were justified according to department policy or apologize for misconduct. Media groups can also be invited to participate in citizen academies, in which citizens can undergo similar training officers face in police academies. News channels and reporters alike can receive official training, which can lead to interesting material to present to the public (who may be unaware of police technique and procedure) and solid media relations. Another policy recommendation would be to implement more plainclothes (particularly community resource officers) into specific areas. It is no surprise that many communities or neighborhoods harbor anti-police sentiments. Citizens mostly only see the uniform, rather than the person wearing it. In a sense, the uniform may be seen as pedestal of power used to force the community’s hand. By simply donning casual clothing, officers may still be seen as just that, officers. However, removing the uniform could lead to more cooperation by adapting and blending into the community. Police would not discard the badge, but rather develop enough of a rapport in the community so that it is not required. After implementing this program, administrators would distribute surveys measuring the success and perceptions of the program every six months. He or she can give these surveys to community resource officers, who would in turn ask cooperative residents to fill it out. Questions would measure if citizens were aware of the community policing campaign, what events they attended, perception of success in reducing crime rates, and overall happiness towards the program.

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