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Summary
of
Rethinking Organizational Change in Policing
(Draft version)

A Report on a Locally-Initiated Research Partnership
funded by the National Institute of Justice

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Summary:

This project continued the APD-UNM Research Partnership's ethnographic study of the transformation of organizational culture as one urban police agency pursued department-wide implementation of community policing. The original study had given the Research Partnership extensive knowledge of organizational and cultural dynamics within the police department and between police and the community. The key findings of that study (Wood, Davis, and Rouse 1999; Wood and Davis forthcoming) depicted a department that had found only limited success in building a police culture guided by community policing: As of 1998, four years into the implementation of community policing in Albuquerque, a great deal of institutional energy and re-organization had focused on the new model, some very significant changes had occurred in specific areas, but shifts in overall police culture remained remarkably limited. The second phase of the project sought to continue tracking departmental efforts to drive community policing more deeply into the organization.

But in its second phase, the Partnership also sought to deepen the university-police department collaboration in a new direction. In this phase of the project, we strove to build on the knowledge generated in the first phase, in two ways:

1. By feeding back into the department our key insights and knowledge of departmental dynamics, as well as findings from academic research on policing nationwide, to contribute to informed decision-making by police management and informal police leaders at all levels.

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2. By tracking how this “reflexive feedback” regarding departmental culture influenced the ongoing implementation of community policing and the development of organizational culture generally.

In addition, an implicit goal throughout the project was to foster a deepening institutional relationship between the Albuquerque Police Department and the University of New Mexico, in order to create organizations dedicated to mutual learning, more open institutional relationships, and useful research.

Thus, the APD-UNM Research Partnership sought to sustain continuing research access while at the same time taking a more active role in the transformation of the police department in a direction set by its leadership. This “participatory action research” model (Cole 1992; Whyte 1991a, 1991b) represents a non-traditional research role, but one particularly well-suited to an ethnographic study of police culture – as long as we remember that the dynamics of organizational culture being studied here are not independent of the feedback created by our role in the department. Thus, these findings should not be interpreted as the “natural dynamics” of a department undergoing the transition to community policing, but rather as a study of how those dynamics can be influenced through the systematic presentation of new policing ideas, reflexive feedback from academic outsiders, and extensive dialogue between scholars and police leaders.

The full report first outlines the findings of the first phase of research regarding police culture; describes the participatory action research process we followed; analyzes the development and current state of community policing implementation in the department; and assesses the impact of our feedback process on the implementation effort. It concludes by

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suggesting that we need to revise our models of what processes may lead to successful implementation, and by discussing the future of the APD-UNM Research Partnership. This summary highlights the central insights of the full report.

Research Process: Ethnography and participant-action research

Two goals guided the research design of this phase: Providing input and feedback to Department personnel in a format useful to them in their day-to-day leadership roles; and continuing to gather ethnographic data allowing us to track both the impact of our feedback and broader developments within the culture of policing in Albuquerque. The feedback process occurred primarily via focus groups. From January through October 1999, the Partnership hosted a series of 21 focus groups with APD personnel. These focus groups dealt with topics we identified as areas of emerging concern within APD; for each, we wrote a short "Feedback Report" (from 2 to 12 pages long), and distributed it to a list of invitees drawn up from our contacts in the ethnographic fieldwork on patrol and from participant-observation in management settings (see below). The Feedback Reports dealt with the following issues (see appendices for copies of feedback reports):

- Front-line supervisory issues
- APD and Community Policing
- Problem-solving in APD
- Subcultures of policing in APD
- Management via CompStat
- Leadership in APD
- CompStat and Community Policing
- Critical Incident Training and Community Policing

For each focus group, participants were asked to read the draft write-up prior to the meeting.

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Focus group discussion then centered on whether our write-up adequately captured APD's situation regarding the particular issue; the Department's strengths, weaknesses, and the challenges; and how the issue might best be addressed. We also asked for suggestions for improving our write-up, though we maintained editorial control within the Partnership. The principal investigator facilitated all focus group discussions, and a research associate took notes of the APD feedback. Out of this feedback, we wrote a final version of the report. At some point in this process, varying from one Feedback Report to another, the Chief of Police also read and commented upon the report. Finally, each Report was distributed throughout the Department, using APD's regular communications channels.

This process proved quite workable, generating strong participation and active engagement – indeed, some fine arguments – about substantive issues in policing at the lieutenant, captain, and deputy chief (and equivalent civilian) levels; sergeant-level focus groups were more uneven, though some were excellent. In addition, we periodically convened focus groups simply to check in with key departmental personnel, using the time for a less structured discussion of the challenges facing APD. These have proven valuable in understanding ongoing organizational dynamics.

We encountered significant problems in sustaining strong focus group participation at the level of front-line officers and civilian employees. Though, with heavy investment of Partnership time in face-to-face invitations, we did host successful focus groups with strong participation at this level, by and large attendance was much weaker than at other levels, and front-line civilians were very reticent participants in groups with sworn officers present. Ultimately, we focused our

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efforts on supervisor- and management-level focus groups and relied on face-to-face interaction with front-line officers.

These problems aside, the focus groups at supervisory and management levels worked extremely well. Though we kept participation in them voluntary, attendance was generally strong: At the management level, twelve to fourteen captains, civilian division heads, and deputy chiefs attended a typical session; at the mid-supervisory level, seven to nine lieutenants and deputy division heads attended a typical session. Most sessions were engaged and focused: APD personnel clearly wanted to be part of talking about the problems facing the Department, and liked having the opportunity to give input on documents addressing those problems in concrete ways.

In all of this, our goal was to foster a culture of organizational learning guided by disciplined reflection on APD's own experience; by current understandings of desirable policing models; and by current research on what works in policing. We sought not to become another voice of authority within a paramilitary command-and-control model of a police organization, but rather to help foster a more dispersed model of decision-making, creative problem-solving, and active engagement in thinking about and addressing emerging challenges and opportunities in the Department. Thus, **dialogue** was the fundamental premise of our work – a dialogue in which we were active participants and sometimes-insistent critics, but also learners from the deeper experience and knowledge of police personnel.

In sum, our strategy in designing the reflexive feedback mechanism in the Department was informed by ideas regarding organizational learning, participatory management, and

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communicative action as the basis for structured strategic change.¹

Since October, 1999 we have continued more sporadic focus groups at various levels in the Department, focusing more intensively on supervisory and upper management personnel, as well as creating greater dialogue across vertical levels of the organization. Over the course of the project, we convened 38 focus groups lasting about an hour and a half, either for specific discussion of Feedback Reports or general monitoring of organizational dynamics. Of these, 14 were at the level of division heads, captains, and deputy chiefs; 8 at the level of lieutenants and deputy division heads; 6 at level of sergeants and first-line civilian supervisors, and 6 at level of officers and front-line civilians; four groups were cross-rank, primarily lieutenant-sergeant or captain-lieutenant.

Finally, throughout the entire second phase of the Partnership, we have provided informal feedback to the Department by discussing recent national research on policing and our analysis of organizational dynamics, police culture, and current events in APD. Some of these were informal meetings with individuals; others involved formal presentations to groups of Department personnel. These exchanges occurred at our own initiative, at the initiative of APD personnel, and simply in the course of our participant-observation work on patrol, in briefings, and in organizational meetings. In this vein, we met every other month with the Chief of Police, and regularly with key personnel at all other levels. Among key collaborators in this process have been the lead civilians in the Planning Division, the five area commanders, and a cross section of

¹ On organizational learning, participatory management, and communicative action, see respectively: Cole (1989); Schein (1992) and Kanter, Stein, Jick (1992); and Habermas (1984, 1987).

lieutenants, sergeants, civilian supervisors, and patrol officers.

Ethnographic research:

Parallel to this feedback process, we continued to engage in ride alongs, foot patrol, and bike patrol with police officers, though at a somewhat lower level than in previous phases of our research. Over the life of the project we conducted more than 3000 hours of this kind of participant observation. We also continued to engage regularly in participant observation in internal management meetings of the Department, police briefings, APD meetings with community groups, etc.

Finally, during the last six months of the project, the principal investigator made short (two full days, typically) research trips to four other urban police departments in the western half of the United States. These were selected by virtue of being the lead agencies in medium-sized or large urban areas with strong racial/ethnic diversity; and of being at least 4 years into the implementation of community policing; and by the availability of an inside facilitator for the visit, chosen on the basis of reputational factors as a respected figure not overly tied to one subculture within his/her agency. Each trip included interviews with personnel from front-line officers up through chiefs or deputy chiefs of police (average of 10 interviews/site), plus at least brief ride-along time with patrol, community policing, and special enforcement teams. All interviewees and each participating department was guaranteed anonymity.² Though such brief

² Though confidentiality guarantees prohibit me from properly thanking the facilitators of these brief trips, I am deeply indebted to them for their help; without their endorsement, I could not have had anything like the frank conversations about sensitive police matters with the array

visits do not allow in-depth knowledge of organizational dynamics, they do allow us to assess which of the patterns identified in Albuquerque are idiosyncratic to local conditions and which represent common results of the forces impinging on American urban policing. We highlight here those patterns we believe hold significance for the broader organizational field of urban police departments around the country.

Community Policing in APD: Achievements and obstacles

The full report highlights a number of achievements in implementing community policing since our report detailing implementation status as of 1998 (Wood, Rouse, and Davis 1999).

These achievements include:

- decentralization of resources and authority out to geographically-based area commands;
- linking of area commander promotions (and the status that comes with it) to support for community policing;
- changes in Academy training;
- implementation of a school resource officer (SRO) program in replacement of DARE;
- important but isolated examples of significant community policing efforts (problem-solving partnerships with community groups; individual officers doing problem solving; community-based court monitoring; crime prevention efforts).

of personnel I did. As a result, I would have far less confidence that the organizational dynamics facing APD are also faced by other similar-sized agencies.

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Parallel to these achievements, however, community policing in the sense of problem solving, community partnerships, and proactive policing by most patrol officers has largely stagnated. The full report analyzes this development, tracing it to a combination of (1) staff shortages rooted in heavy recent departures of sworn personnel, as large cohorts of officers hired twenty years ago become eligible for retirements; and (2) problems of organizational communication. The report discusses the Department's adoption of "CompStat" management processes as a case study of organizational communications difficulties, and APD's efforts to troubleshoot them, partly as a result of Partnership intervention (see below).

Assessment of Feedback: Toward a more reflexive organization

Two areas in which the Partnership hoped to make a substantial difference in the Albuquerque Police Department were (1) undermining the high wall dividing sworn and civilian police employees by fomenting much greater civilian/sworn collaboration built on mutual respect; and (2) fostering the consolidation within APD of what we have termed a "strong culture of policing" that combines the most effective elements of all the current subcultures into something approximating a coherent organizational culture of policing.

Regarding neither can we discern the kind of fundamental transformation to which the Partnership aspired. (1) was seen as an important goal by some civilian APD participants, but only as a hoped-for secondary effect by other Partnership members; in any case, the fact that front-line civilian employees and first-level supervisors were only brought into the focus group process with great effort and marginal success (as noted above) meant that little headway was

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made at this level in fostering mutually-respectful interchange or dialogue. Fostering such dialogue was much more successful at higher levels, with civilian and sworn managers and upper-level supervisors engaging actively in vigorous conversations and healthy arguments about problems facing the Department. Such dialogue is an achievement – but these civilians were arguably already in positions of authority from which to enter into them; the Partnership simply provided a structured forum for doing so.

For reasons already discussed, (2) has not occurred to a significant degree, either. Problems of organizational communications and sworn staffing presented insurmountable obstacles to the effective consolidation of a strong organizational culture incorporating the best elements of community policing and other subcultures. At least, those obstacles have been insurmountable so far, in this and apparently numerous other urban departments, if our brief visits and the available literature are any indication.³

Thus, at one level our blunt assessment is that the feedback process had remarkably little hard impact on the Albuquerque Police Department: Our input did not deeply transform the way APD personnel experienced their jobs or ran the Department. Police culture in Albuquerque continues to represent a fragmented agglomeration of remnant and partial subcultures of traditional policing, paramilitary policing, community policing, police administration, etc., and it remains undetermined whether a strong organizational culture will coalesce out of this fragmentation – and if so, which priorities it will emphasize. This remains an ongoing struggle

³ See Skogan and Hartnett (1997); Chicago Community Policing Evaluation Consortium (1999). On wider outcomes nationally, see the various evaluation papers to be published in a volume edited by Wesley Skogan.

for the soul of policing, as chronicled elsewhere (Wood, forthcoming).

Yet, in other ways, we believe that the feedback process has had a discernible impact – albeit via “soft” influence – on the situation in the Albuquerque Police Department. The full report documents this assertion, using interpretive evidence, some harder evidence, and the CompStat-and-community-policing situation as a case study. We believe that in fact the Research Partnership has been a success on a number of levels, including some with significant long-term implications for policing in Albuquerque. These include:

1. The Partnership helped keep the Department relatively self-aware of the holes and setbacks in community policing implementation, and helped confront managers with the “real situation” as seen from grassroots levels of the organization.
2. The Partnership helped keep organizational focus on the strategic vision of community policing as a long-term shift, and contributed to keeping reform implementation from being inundated with the details of management.
3. The Partnership has been one key instrument through which the chief of police has forced open the police department to the presence and influence of outsiders.
4. Through forthcoming publications and extensive oral presentations nationally, the findings of the Partnership have become part of the national conversation among scholars, police leaders, and federal funding agencies regarding the current dynamics of policing reform in the United States.⁴ Our contribution has revolved around new insight into

⁴ See Wood, Davis, and Rouse (1999); Wood, Davis, and Rouse (forthcoming 2001a); Wood and Davis (forthcoming 2001); Wood (forthcoming 2001). We have also presented various aspects of our findings at annual meetings of the American Criminological Society and

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cultural dynamics of policing, organizational implementation strategies, and re-emphasizing the value of ethnographic research for informing scholarly thinking about law enforcement.⁵

5. The Partnership appears to have moved some distance in changing the relationship between the flagship law enforcement agency and the flagship university in the state of New Mexico. As discussed below, the institutional partnership between the Albuquerque Police Department and the Institute for Social Research at the University of New Mexico will continue past the end of two rounds of NIJ funding. As important, though difficult to trace to any direct influence of the Partnership, at least three other research or evaluation projects involving faculty from ISR or former researchers from this Partnership are now underway.
6. Regarding the CompStat management strategy: Over the last year, the priorities and emphases highlighted in APD's CompStat meetings have changed. Partly in response to our input and partly in response to management self-critique and feedback from lower level supervisors (the latter partly rooted in focus group discussions), management has begun to shift the CompStat process to better link it with community policing emphases.

the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences; the NIJ/COPS National Policing Conference; and at a Chicago working session of a group of prominent policing scholars for an edited volume.

⁵ Of course, there is a long and respected tradition of ethnographic work on policing (Skolnick 1994 [1966]; Wilson 1968; Bittner 1967, 1970; Van Maanen 1978; Reuss-Ianni 1983). More recently, despite extensive funding for policing research in the late 1990s, little new ethnographic work has been published – leaving police scholars citing these classics, and sometimes assuming erroneously that little has changed in contemporary policing. Valuable ethnographic work by Steve Herbert (1998) is the strongest exception to this pattern.

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This effort continues.

7. At management team meetings, the principal investigator has presented summaries of recent research findings on the effectiveness of community policing in other cities, including findings on the need to broker participation by other (non-police) city agencies in problem-solving efforts. That input has sparked efforts by APD and the Partnership to generate similar broad city participation in solving problems that generate crime and disorder.
8. Through multiple iterations of the focus group process at the supervisory and command levels, the Partnership has introduced into the core organizational life of the Department, and into the experience of senior and mid-level sworn and civilian personnel, a degree of public dialogue that appears to be relatively rare in large police departments, where command-and-control models often hold sway (Maguire 1997; Langworthy 1986; Manning 1977). Over the long term, this may have planted the seeds for a stronger culture of organizational learning at the command level.

As an experiment in participatory action research and reflexive organizational learning, the Partnership was not designed as a scientific pre- and post-test of a single organizational intervention. Rather, as a process of organizational feedback and monitoring, the project allows the kind of interpretive argument presented here. These findings – now including this draft report – have been fed back into the Department through the same reflexive process described above, and APD personnel afforded the opportunity to confirm or take issue with them. We believe that

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this interpretive argument and confirmation by organizational representatives offer the most useful evaluation available to us, given the nature of the Partnership. However, the full report also draws on some limited “hard” data from a recent Departmental survey, which documents the communications problems and the existence of frank mutual critique within APD as an organization.

Toward the Future: Long-term change in policing

At the outset, we – like many scholars and practitioners – assumed a model of organizational change premised on transforming police culture by re-orienting current officers toward community policing. We now believe this widely assumed model to be unrealistic, and posit a different organizational change process. It combines: (1) Institutional change, i.e. strategically-led shifts in the *institutions* of police culture – that is, the key organizational symbols, positions, power centers, decision-making processes, and assumptions about police work; and (2) Cohort turnover, i.e. the gradual shift in officer perspectives and practices made possible as incoming officers are socialized within the transformed institutions of police organizational life.

That is, earlier “realist” models of community policing implementation are, in most large urban departments, still naive: Only a small minority of officers socialized into traditional policing appear to be willing and capable of making the shift to community policing practices. Given accumulating evidence for the effectiveness of those practices, such a shift remains crucial. But strategic police leaders may have to re-orient their leadership toward the slow

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cultivation of new officers from their initial training through years of career development. They can do so by inserting community policing orientations into the key institutions that reproduce police culture over the long term: selection of cadets, Academy training, field training, promotion practices, briefings, management meetings, etc. We call this the strategic re-assessment model of community policing implementation. The full report provides a detailed discussion of what organizational change under this model of institutional transformation and cohort turnover might look like, with important roles for both "community policing zealots" and "reform pragmatists."

Whither the Partnership?

As NIJ support for the APD-UNM Research Partnership was coming to an end, the APD Planning Division and Chief of Police approached the principal investigator to adopt a consulting role with the Department. We shifted this initial request from a private consulting arrangement into an ongoing institutional relationship between UNM's Institute for Social Research and the Albuquerque Police Department. The relationship involves helping the Department conceive and implement organizational change efforts associated with an innovative strategic planning process designed by APD's Director of Planning. In this role, the Partnership will aid in the "strategic re-assessment" of community policing initiatives for which the full report argues.