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Research Preview

Jeremy Travis, Director

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Community Policing in Action: Lessons From an Observational Study

Summary of a Presentation by Stephen Mastrofski, Michigan State University; Roger B. Parks, Indiana University; and Robert E. Worden, State University of New York—Albany

Community policing—a relatively recent addition to law enforcement—aims to increase interaction and cooperation between local police and the people and neighborhoods they serve. Its goals are to reduce and prevent crime and to increase feelings of safety among residents. Passage of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 brought Federal support for implementing and evaluating many community policing programs.

One study conducted in Indianapolis, Indiana, in 1996, sponsored by the National Institute of Justice and the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, focused on police-community interactions in jurisdictions that have implemented some form of community policing. The research project had the following objectives:

- To compare past and present policing methods, particularly in light of the emerging popularity of community policing.
- To reveal more about the nature of police discretion and which features of police organizations influence it.
- To study the effects of factors outside the police department on officer and citizen behavior relevant to policing.
- To determine the consequences of policing on the general public.

This Research in Progress Preview is an initial report of a large study currently in progress. Other analyses of data are expected.

One striking research finding was that as cooperation between police and citizens in solving neighborhood problems increased, the residents felt more secure in their neighborhoods. The study also revealed several factors affecting police responses to citizen requests for assistance, as well as information about the attitudes of police supervisors toward their roles and their relations with subordinates.

Methodology

In 1996 researchers observed police in 12 neighborhoods (police beats) in Indianapolis about 3 years after the city had begun to move toward community policing. These police beats experienced various degrees of socioeconomic distress but were not selected to be representative of the city as a whole. Data were gathered through systematic observations of officers on patrol, observations of supervisors, private interviews with patrol officers and their supervisors, and telephone interviews with residents of the 12 neighborhoods (supplemented by interviews of residents of the city's other 38 police beats).

Neighborhood context

Researchers characterized the neighborhoods using an index of socioeconomic distress that was the sum of the following percentages: labor force that was unemployed, population that was very poor, and families that were headed by single women. Based on this index, the neighborhoods were clustered in groups of low, medium, and high distress.

The study revealed strong positive correlations between the level of socioeconomic distress and several measures of involvement with the police, including the number of calls for service received at the police dispatch center, the number of officers responding to the scenes of reported problems, and police and citizen perceptions of the severity of problems in the neighborhood. Moreover, as socioeconomic distress increased, residents felt less safe walking in

their neighborhoods at night, an indication of the perceived level of safety.

Researchers developed scales representing citizens' perceptions of neighborhood residents' cooperation with police and of police cooperation with residents. These measures strongly predicted increases in perceived safety. As police-citizen cooperation increased, residents considered the neighborhood to be safer.

Requests for assistance and police responses

Researchers also looked at requests by one person for officers to control another person. Requests for such assistance were ranked according to the degree of restriction they placed on the freedom of the targeted party, from advice and persuasion, through warnings and threats, to making someone leave the scene and arrest. On the basis of their observations, researchers gleaned data about the people requesting assistance, police responses, and factors affecting whether police fulfilled such requests.

Compared to other citizens with whom police had contact, citizens requesting the control of other citizens were disproportionately low income and female dealing with a male officer. The situations were generally less serious than other police calls: No emergency existed and evidence did not indicate violence or theft. About half of the cases were domestic disputes that had not yet escalated into violence. Two-thirds of the requesters asked for only one form of control against another citizen.

Researchers found that police were least likely to arrest the target (33 percent of requests for arrest were fulfilled), but most likely to send the target away (75 percent of such requests were fulfilled). When citizens requested more than one form of control, police nearly always granted either all or none of these requests. Nearly 60 percent of the citizens requesting control had their most restrictive request carried out.

A number of factors proved to be statistically significant predictors of police responsiveness for controlling assistance. The following increased the probability of assistance: strong evidence against the target, a middle-income (as opposed to low-income) requester, and an officer with more training in community policing principles. Decreasing the chance that the request would be fulfilled were a requester who asked for an arrest, a requester who behaved disrespectfully to police, a requester who was a crime suspect, and a responding officer with more years of police experience.

Variables that were not statistically significant included the age of the requester, whether the requester or the target was intoxicated, whether the requester was injured, the race and gender of the requester and target, whether the target was disrespectful, and the severity of the problem. Also not significant were several characteristics of the responding officer: whether the officer had a specialized community policing assignment, the officer's attitude toward handling order maintenance problems, and whether the officer had a college degree.

Future data analysis will compare situations when the target of control was present with those when the target was not.

The role of police supervisors

The adoption of community policing principles affects the role prescribed for supervisors. Previously, supervisors' predominant concern was control, achieved mainly through manipulating limited sanctions and offering even more limited incentives. Today, police supervision is expected to place more emphasis on supporting subordinates.

Data gathered in the Indianapolis study showed that supervisors considered supportive activities (helping officers develop sound judgment, providing feedback on their performance, and helping them work on problems in the neighborhoods they serve) more important than constraining ones (enforcing rules, disseminating information on departmental directives, and monitoring officers' completion of reports).

Researchers suggested that the emphasis on support is due in part to the supervisory structure in Indianapolis. Supervisors are not individually responsible for a squad of officers, and on any given shift, two or three supervisors may share responsibilities. Supervisors are not individually accountable for officers' performance. Researchers believe this model's deemphasis on control affects how the supervisors perceive their role.

Issues for further study

The Indianapolis research demonstrated that community policing efforts may make a difference. Perceived safety in a neighborhood was higher when police and residents cooperated in problem solving; officers with more community policing training were more willing to grant a citizen's request to control another citizen; and the police supervisors interviewed emphasized their support of rather than their control of subordinates.

The study's findings raised a number of topics for further consideration by researchers and policymakers. One avenue for further consideration is even stronger encouragement of police-citizen cooperation. Another is modifying training programs to address the challenges of dealing with the circumstances under which these requests are most likely to arise: low-income female requesters who are not suspects but who may be disrespectful to a male officer. Researchers also need to learn more about the long-term consequences of fulfilling these requests. Finally, researchers noted the need for more refined measures of supervisors' styles and to what extent they affect subordinates' performance patterns.

This document is based on a discussion of research conducted by Dr. Stephen Mastrofski, Professor, Michigan State University; Dr. Albert J. Reiss, Jr., Professor Emeritus, Yale University; Dr. Roger B. Parks, Professor, Indiana University; and Dr. Robert E. Worden, Associate Professor, State University of New York—Albany. Cosponsored by NIJ and the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, the research was conducted under NIJ grant number 95–IJ–CX–0071. This presentation to an audience of researchers and criminal justice practitioners was given as part of NIJ's Research in Progress Seminar Series. A 60-minute VHS videotape of the seminar, *Community Policing in Action: Lessons From an Observational Study*, is available for $19 ($24 in Canada and other countries). Ask for NCJ 167028. Use the order form below to obtain this videotape and any of the other tapes now available in the series.

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