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Police Perceptions of Community Policing

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Abstract

Community policing is an emerging practice of policing that aims to address crime and social disorder in a proactive manner. Community relations, problem solving and restructured police organizations are among the characteristics that make up the foundation of this practice. This research study seeks to understand the community policing model as well as police officers perceptions of this common practice through a convenience survey administered to a sample of sworn police officers. Police officers from various police departments on the South Shore of Massachusetts were invited to partake in this survey, which consisted of a series of likert-scale questions. Findings from this study indicated a support for community policing and difference in opinion in terms of its effectiveness.

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Police Perceptions of Community Policing

Police corruption and brutality are no foreign concepts in the United States, specifically within the past few years. The media especially has played a role in portraying law enforcement in a negative light due to the actions of only a handful of police officers. For these exact reasons, social barriers have been established between the police and the public, which have deteriorated the trust and legitimacy of police in the eyes of the public. Over the years, a common practice known as community policing has been adopted by many police departments across the country that aim to reinvent the ways in which officers police their community. Methods such as strengthening current policies, improving interactions with the public, and enacting an overall proactive police force have been used in order to reduce crime and social disorder within communities. The primary purpose of this research is to gain an understanding of the community-policing model and determine police perceptions of this practice.

Over the past several decades, the standard of policing in America has changed significantly. Methods that were once seen as traditional policing have now been replaced and instead, the practice of community policing has been adopted. However, it is important to examine the history of traditional policing in order to gain a better understanding of how much policing has progressed over time. Traditional policing is one model of policing that is rather straightforward: respond to service calls and be reactive to crime. Police in the traditional model are referred to as “crime fighters” where officers are particularly interested in handling serious crimes as opposed to smaller crimes and social disorder. Furthermore, police who take on traditional policing methods are also interested in applying the law and deterring crime (Green, 2000). Traditional policing tends to place great importance on the number of arrests that are made, as well as how fast officers respond to service calls. While it is hard to argue that officers

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responding to calls and arresting criminals is a *bad* thing, there is one component that is excluded from this type of policing practice; a proactive police force. Traditional policing is centered on more aggressive tactics, specifically when it comes to arrests. In fact, some officers under the traditional model feel as though the threat of arrest is the “best” way to gain control and compliance from those engaging in criminal behavior (Greene, 2000). This is exactly why police officers under this model are seen as socially isolated because instead of wanting to focus on community building, their main focus is to solely maintain structure and function. For this exact reason, social barriers have been created and police are viewed as a separate entity as compared to citizens in their community. With that being said, it is nearly impossible for police to control crime if they are only relying on themselves to do the job. Crime reduction should be considered a joint effort between both police agencies and the surrounding community.

While many may not agree with the methods of traditional policing, it has served as a stepping-stone toward more progressive methods of policing. The idea of a proactive police force has always been emphasized in the community-policing model. The goal of community policing is to analyze what underlying problems might be present in the community and devise a plan to counteract these issues. Because of this, community policing is on the rise in many departments across the country with the long-term goal being to focus on important community crime issues and social disorder rather than simply responding and reacting to service calls. Goldstein and Green (1990 & 2000) have outlined the many promises that community-oriented policing has to offer. For starters, community policing has the ability to strengthen communities in order to resist and prevent crime and social disorder. There is no better place to start than the actual community itself in order to identify ongoing issues in different neighborhoods. Another promise of community policing is to create a “harmonious relationship” (Greene, 2000, p. 302) between

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the police and the general public. As mentioned before, several social barriers, such as lack of support and distrust, have been established due to controversial issues regarding policing.

Community policing is a good starting point in breaking down these social barriers so that police can gain an understanding of community needs. Establishing a working relationship with the public will not only reinforce the legitimacy of police departments, but also allow the public to feel a strong sense of public safety in their community. This policing model in general is thought to produce more committed, empowered and analytic officers, which is a major reason for other departments to adopt this model in order to potentially reduce crime in their area (Green, 2000).

So what exactly is the best way for police departments to adopt the model of community policing? For starters, it is important for police departments to shift away from the traditional policing model since community policing emphasizes different beliefs and policing methods. Goldstein (1990; as cited in Greene, 2000) outlined specific requirements that are necessary in order for police to shift from their traditional model of policing into community-oriented policing. One of the first requirements in this shift is to view community policing as an “organizing philosophy” throughout the entire police department. The reason for this is because police agencies need their officers to view this as a direct way of policing. Rather than community policing being a temporary means of controlling crime, the term philosophy suggests that community policing should be a permanent way of thinking about improving public safety as a whole. The second requirement outlined by Goldstein regarding the adoption of community policing is for community policing to “take root in police agencies” (Goldstein, 1990; as cited in Greene, 2000, p. 302). In other words, all officers need to be on board with this change in policing tactics. While it is certainly impossible for officers to change their habits over night, it should be expected that in order for this model to succeed in any given police department, all

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officers should make every effort to enforce the same policing tactics when they are on the job.

The third requirement in adopting this policing method is to “overcome resistance from the subculture of police” (Goldstein, 1990; as cited in Greene, 2000, p. 302). Subculture refers to danger, authority and efficiency which all happen to be terms associated with traditional policing. In order to have an effective department that runs on the basis of community policing, it is crucial for departments to resist these types of methods and instead focus on values outlined by community policing models. Lastly, one of the main requirements outlined by Goldstein (1990; as cited in Greene, 2000) insisted that both the police and the public work together to resolve community crime and disorder problems. It is simply not enough for police to respond to service calls and go on to the next task. It is important for them to engage with the public in order to conquer other underlying issues because these types of issues will always be present if nothing is done to resolve them. As Greene (2000, p. 302) explained, “such threshold requirements require that those who advocate and implement community policing see it as an alternative paradigm to traditional policing.” In other words, in order to fully adopt the method of community policing, departments must be willing to completely reform their current practices and shift into more engaging, effective practices.

The entire idea of community policing has revolved around what has failed in other models of policing. Over the years, law enforcement has begun to re-examine the role of police departments as it relates to public safety. Fridell and Wycoff (2004) have outlined several characteristics of community policing. The first point outlined was that there has to be a mutual effort between the police and the community in identifying problems of crime and disorder. Additionally, the police *alone* cannot control crime. While every effort is made to reduce crime and keep social order under control, the police are not capable of knowing every bit of

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information pertaining to crime in their community. It is important that they rely on the public to give them tips and point them in the right direction in order to be more aware of what is going on in certain neighborhoods. The last characteristic revolves around a proactive versus reactive police force (Fridell & Wycoff, 2004). Being proactive allows for the deterrence of crime due to how engaging officers are when they respond to service calls. This is a more effective means of policing as opposed to being reactive because instead of simply responding to the service call, officers are determined to get to the root cause of the problem in order to deter similar crimes in the future.

Policing strategies, specifically in community-oriented policing, are effective when key elements are taken into account. In order to explain why community policing has the potential to be an extremely effective model, it is important to review its core elements. Some of the major themes of community policing in the literature include: community engagement, problem solving, and “decentralizing” police organizations.

Research on policing has indicated that in order to begin the process of reducing crime in surrounding communities, it is crucial that the relationship between law enforcement and the public be improved. For example, Fridell and Wycoff (2004, p. 4) explain that “the police are the public and the public are the police.” This idea reflects the theme of community engagement because police should not have to separate themselves and be their own entity. Instead, one of the terms associated with community engagement is the idea of a partnership. Community policing is thought to be a partnership between the police and the public that allows both parties to counteract issues of crime and social disorder in the community and increase public safety for everyone. Skogan (2008) pointed out that working with the public can allow for new policing priorities to emerge. In other words, allowing citizens to share their input might shed light on

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issues happening in the community that the police otherwise may not have known about. Skogan explained, “Departments need to reorganize in order to provide opportunities for citizens to come into contact with their officers under circumstances that encourage these exchanges. There has to be a significant amount of informal contact between police and residents, so that trust and cooperation can develop between the prospective partners” (Skogan, 2008, p. 47). Not only does forming a partnership strengthen the bond between the police and the community they serve, it also allows for citizens to help maintain order within their own community.

A second theme seen throughout research on community policing is problem solving. Stein and Griffin (2017) point out that policing strategies are most effective when key elements of the neighborhood are taken into account: levels of cohesion and trust, shared expectations among residents, feelings of safety, and crime as a problem. As previously expressed, the police cannot prevent or control crime all by themselves. Community members can help the police understand the scope of the problems that are occurring in their own neighborhoods. With that being said, it is important to improve the quality of interactions among neighbors. This in turn would likely increase the feelings of safety among citizens (Stein & Griffin, 2017). Citizens often play the role of informants when it comes to crime, considering they are the ones living in the community. Unlike police, citizens are more likely to hear or witness incidents firsthand. Additionally, it is important for the police to empower residents to take responsibility for their neighborhood. In doing so, the message will be made clear that the residents care about their neighborhoods and are working to prevent crime (Lawrence & McCarthy, 2013).

Police, on the other hand, have their own techniques of problem solving that are separate from working with the public. Problem solving is a method used by the police in order to improve crime reduction strategies. For example, Skogan (2008, p. 50) explained that problem

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solving “highlights the importance of discovering the situations that produce for calls for public assistance, identifying causes which lie behind them and design tactics to deal with these problems.” In this case, officers should be primarily concerned with determining patterns to certain crimes in order to prevent them from happening in the future.

Another common theme of community policing is decentralization. Decentralization refers to changes in the organizational structure of a police department. The structure of the police department becomes “less hierarchical” (Lawrence & McCarthy, 2013, p. 6) and instead allows officers to have individual authority over the way they resolve community conflict. The decentralization of police departments also involves situational leadership among individual officers. It is the responsibility of individual officers to assess the situation and determine how they want to approach it. Officers are encouraged to take the initiative and come up with “creative solutions to specific neighborhood problems without the restriction of blanket, overly-rigid policies” (Lawrence & McCarthy, 2013, p. 6). Decentralization requires an all hands on deck mindset because community policing will not be effective if every officer does not make the effort to change the nature of their own police work.

In conclusion, community police cannot be effective unless all of these themes are fulfilled. There cannot be an organizational transformation without community engagement and problem solving and vice versa. Greene (2000, p. 334) argued that “police departments will not be prepared to achieve effective problem solving and community partnerships until the beliefs, perceptions, attitudes and behaviors of individual police officers become more compatible with the redefinition and enlargement of their jobs as prescribed by the community policing model.” Overall, community policing is a long-term commitment to reducing crime. Establishing working relationships with community members, working to identify the root causes of crime,

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and transforming the structure of the police department will ultimately make for a successful police department.

Methodology

Community-oriented policing is a common practice adopted by police agencies to build ties with community members in order to address crime and social disorder. Community policing is often implemented when other forms of policing, such as traditional, begin to fail and create social barriers between law enforcement and community members. While crime certainly persists, police agencies have resorted to turning to the public to help address issues going on in their very own community in order to increase public safety. While this method of policing may appear to be widely accepted from both the public and the police, it cannot be completely confirmed without examining perceptions of sworn police officers. The purpose of this research study is to gain an understanding of what police officers' perceptions are on the practice of community policing.

Description of Study

The research methodology for this study will consist of an online convenience survey administered through Google Forms. The survey consists of a series of Likert-scales that are designed to measure police officers' perceptions of community policing. For example, one of the statements says, "Community policing is a practice that should be adopted by all police departments". Participants will then have four options to choose from: strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree (please see appendix). Survey statements address certain criteria in community policing, such as relationships with community members, crime rates, as well as department policies and practices. The survey concludes with demographic information.

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Participants will be asked to indicate the number of years they have been involved in law enforcement, their rank in the police force, their age, gender, and race/ethnicity.

Google Forms was chosen because it allows each individual question to be analyzed, which makes it easier to determine the most common responses. Additional reasons for why the survey instrument was the chosen method is due to the fact that computer technology has allowed for researchers to collect data that is generated for them. Surveys, specifically Google surveys, generate pie charts that give percentages for each question. Responses to each individual question are grouped into their own pie chart, which is extremely beneficial in analyzing the answers that participants gave. The purpose of this survey is to analyze responses from participants and identify common themes. The end goal is to be able to draw a conclusion on what police officers attitudes are toward the community-policing model.

Sampling Method and Frame

The final sample size in this study consisted of forty-five sworn police officers from various departments located on the South Shore of Massachusetts. At the conclusion of this study, the response rate consisted of a total of forty-one participants.

Research Question

The research question was to determine whether police officers believe community oriented policing is more effective at reducing crime and social disorder compared to more traditional models of policing.

Results

After administering a convenience survey on the topic of community policing to individual police officers, there were a total of forty-one responses received. Each response gave valuable insight regarding police officers perceptions toward the practice of community policing

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and what they believe does and does not work. There was a consistent theme among all of the responses in terms of support for community policing. Each response indicated that community policing is an effective way of building a positive relationship with the public and that their own department strongly supports this practice. It was clear through the results that police officers feel strongly about community policing and believe that it is a practice that all police departments should implement.

While many of the survey responses demonstrated a steady consistency, there were a few questions that had significant differences in responses. One of the questions asked during the survey was whether or not participants believe that community policing is the *most effective* means of reducing crime and social disorder. Responses to this question were completely split, with half agreeing and the other half disagreeing. This was by far the most interesting portion of results due to the fact that opinions were completely 50/50. In order to get a better understanding on the reasons behind these opinions, I turned to the section of the survey that allowed participants to provide any other thoughts they may have on community policing. It was here that reasons for disagreement were shared, and many of the reasons for disagreeing were extremely similar in nature. To sum it up, participants who disagreed with community policing being the most effective method believed that while community policing is certainly a good idea in theory, it is not a “one size fits all” approach to policing. Participant’s explained that it is not the answer to all issues, specifically because every community has different demographics and different areas of concern. Additionally, community policing is thought to also face struggles due to there being a lack of partnership. Feedback provided from survey participants explained that both law enforcement and residents are not equally committed. As one participant pointed out, some citizens do not appreciate the work of police and often have a negative view toward law

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enforcement. On the other hand, another participant explained that the hardest part to community policing is getting all officers to believe that this practice actually works. Many officers want to see instant resolution rather than trying to work through the problem at hand. In both cases, it is nearly impossible for community policing to be effective if both parties lack their end of the partnership. Additional feedback from one individual participant stated, "there has to be a multifaceted approach to crime reduction. Community policing is important, but not the singular answer. Parents, courts, schools, and clergy also need to remain engaged. It takes a village." Other survey responses seemed to reflect this same idea; community policing is effective in conjunction with other tactics, but is not effective alone.

On the other end of the spectrum, participants who agreed with community policing being an effective means of reducing crime and social disorder also gave some perspective. A large portion of the feedback put emphasis on the idea that community policing is a partnership between the police and the public. The responses indicated that it is crucial for officers to develop working relationships with the people they serve. In order to better serve the community, officers have to get to know the residents first. By doing so, it strengthens the bond between the police and the people they serve and allows for mutual respect. During the survey, approximately 74.4% of participants agreed that citizens in the community they police have respect for police officers while another 12.8% strongly agreed. Roughly 12% of participants claimed to disagree with the fact that the public did not have respect for police officers in the community. Overall, each survey response indicated that community policing is a great tool so long as both the community and police are willing to participate.

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Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine what police officers attitudes are towards the practice of community policing. Although this study made every effort to provide an accurate depiction of police perceptions, there were certainly limitations involved. For starters, the sample group that volunteered to respond to the survey only consisted of approximately forty-five police officers. While responses were certainly critical to this research, it may not have been representative of *all* police departments in the United States. In other words, what works for a few police departments in Massachusetts may not be the best option for other departments across the country. The data only represents a small portion of police officers and therefore may not portray an accurate depiction of police officers perceptions on community policing.

A second limitation has to do with the fact that the responses were only representative of police officers. While the purpose of this study was to analyze police officers perceptions, it is possible that their attitudes differ from that of the general public. For instance, if law enforcement agencies were to confirm that they found community policing to be a useful practice, we would have to *assume* that the public feels the exact same way considering the idea of community policing is a partnership between the two parties. The last limitation involves the survey instrument being used to conduct this study. While the survey is an easy and fast way of receiving responses, there is no guarantee that all participants will fully understand what is being asked of them in the survey. Although questions are designed to be as straightforward as possible, we cannot assume that everyone will fully comprehend each question and answer it accordingly.

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Conclusion

Based off of this research study, there are a few conclusions that can be drawn about police officers perceptions on community policing. It is clear that community relations are critical in building a trust factor between the public and the police. Community policing allows officers to better serve their community as long as a strong partnership is fostered and a mutual trust exists. Furthermore, the effectiveness of community policing relies heavily on both law enforcement *and* community members being committed to this partnership. There also appears to be a divide in opinion on community policing in terms of its effectiveness. While many officers believe this practice is a tried and true method, others believe that community policing is not the singular answer to reducing crime and social disorder. Rather, it is important to recognize which communities can benefit from community policing and which communities may require other means of policing in order to hold offenders accountable. The history of policing has seen significant progression over the years with departments changing the structure of their policing tactics. The implementation of community policing has opened new doors for police officers to approach issues of crime in a proactive manner. Nonetheless, if law enforcement agencies continue to take strides toward addressing issues of crime while maintaining a partnership with community members, policing in general will see even more improvements in years to come.

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Appendix**To what extent do you agree with the following statements:**

Community policing is thought to encourage partnerships between police officers and the people they serve in order to solve public safety issues.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

My department supports the practice of community policing

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Community policing is an effective way of building a positive relationship with the public.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

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Community policing is a practice that should be adopted by all police departments.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Police academies should extensively educate and train potential officers on the concept of community policing

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Community policing is the most effective means of reducing crime and social disorder

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

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A police officers' attitude towards the public determines whether or not community policing will be effective.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Police officers should be regularly assigned to certain areas in the community in order to get to know the residents better

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Establishing good relationships with citizens should be a priority in policing

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

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The community that I police has a high crime rate

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Officers who patrol neighborhoods with high crime rates are more likely to have negative attitudes toward the public

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

My department takes citizens input on community issues into consideration

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

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Citizens in the community I police have respect for myself and other police officers in my department

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Citizens in the community I police understand the risks that myself and other police officers face while doing our job

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Please indicate your police rank _____

Please indicate the number of years you have been in law enforcement _____

Please provide an approximate number of full-time and part-time officers in your department

Please use the space below to provide any other thoughts you may have on community policing

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What is the highest degree you have earned?

- High School Diploma
- Associates Degree
- Bachelor's Degree
- Masters Degree
- Doctoral Degree

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Other

What is your age?

- 18-25 years old
- 26-35 years old
- 36-45 years old
- 46-55 years old
- 56 or older

What is your race/ethnicity?

- Asian or Pacific Islander
- Black/African American
- White/Caucasian

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- Hispanic/Latino
- American Indian/Native American
- Other: _____