

What community policing teaches us about community criminal justice

by Bonnie Bucqueroux

Proponents of Community Policing (including this author) sincerely believe that this new paradigm has the potential to serve as the model for dramatic reform of the entire criminal justice system. Community policing's successes inspire optimism that the criminal justice system, including law enforcement, prosecution, courts, and corrections, could begin to function as a seamless whole, with all elements working as partners with the people who have the most to gain or lose in making their neighborhoods better and safer places in which to live and work. At the same time, however, the controversial and complicated history of community policing also teaches object lessons about the daunting problems that implementing a community criminal justice system would face.

The purpose of this article is to explore both the opportunities and the obstacles, in the hope of encouraging experiment and innovation and avoiding mistakes.

What is community policing?

Community Policing gathered momentum in the early 1980s, when a group of progressive police executives and visionary academics began working together out of concern that the prevailing system was failing. The system at the time, what we now call traditional policing, was based on the reform model of "modern" or "professional" policing launched in the 1930s, an approach that stressed the efficiency of rapid response as the primary means of addressing serious crime.

At the time, the logic seemed irrefutable – the solution to serious crime simply required identifying, arresting, and then locking up all the bad guys. Spawned in the era of master criminals such as John Dillinger, the focus on the bad guy clearly made sense. The mission of the police was to hurry to the scene, in the hope of catching the culprits on the spot (or at least to gather evidence that would lead to an arrest).

Modern policing also offered the bureaucratic advantages of upgrading the education, training, and pay of police officers, at the same time it uprooted the tangled web of political and personal corruption associated with old-fashioned beat cops. Over the decades, however, it became clear that contemporary crime problems required a different approach.

Of course, the police must always maintain their ability to rush to a crime in progress. Yet research shows that only one in three crimes is ever reported to police – only two in five violent crimes – and crimes in progress typically constitute less than 5% of all calls for police service. The infamous Kitty Genovese case in New York City underscores the dilemma that police face when citizens watch someone slaughtered outside their windows, yet they do not call police, often because they do not know them and they do not want to "get involved." As a society, we also became more aware of the cycle of violence spawned by the hidden crimes of child abuse, domestic violence, and the role that abuse of legal and illegal substances play in the undercurrent of crime and violence in the community.

What community policing teaches us about community criminal justice
by Bonnie Bucqueroux

The medical model

Lessons taught by the medical model If we look at the parallel of the medical model, we see that traditional law enforcement mirrors similar changes – moving from an era when we expected the experts to save us to one where we recognize the role that patients must play in their own well-being. Medicine once held out the promise of the magic bullet – the hope that serious illnesses such as cancer and heart disease could be cured by a new pill or operation. But as we began to understand the actual dynamics of disease, it instead became clear that the best cure is for doctors and patients to develop individually tailored plans that promote not only freedom from disease but fitness and good health.

Patient in particular have good reason to prefer solutions such as quitting smoking and establishing regular exercise and a healthy diet than one that relies on being rescued in the emergency room. The same holds true for crime-riddled communities. The police must always have the capacity to respond immediately to a crisis, but a holistic community criminal justice approach would recognize the contribution of both prevention and intervention.

With medical problems, the patient must take the pills and also do the aerobics. In dealing with crime in the community, this means arresting those who have lost their right to live among us, but it also means solving the underlying problems that allow crime to flourish, ranging from domestic violence to substance abuse to illiteracy and even to boredom on the part of young people. Especially in light of the current crisis of youth violence, we must do a better job of intervening with troubled youth, since we have so few good answers in turning around hardened adult career criminals.

The principles of community policing

The late professor Robert Trojanowicz, who founded the National Center for Community Policing in 1983, identified 10 principles that inform community policing. In his view, the overarching goal should be for the police to become partners with the community, empowering them so that they can shoulder their share of the responsibility and the tough work of making their neighborhoods safer. One of the most potent means of involving the community in exploring creative ways to enhance public safety is to provide them a Community Policing Officer, who acts as a problem solver and as an ombudsman to other public and private agencies that can help.

Without pushing the analogy too far, patrol officers provide rapid response serve as society's emergency room physicians, while Community Policing Officers act as the family physicians, who have the time, opportunity, and continuity to not only treat illness but to prevent disease and promote good health. Experience shows that sick communities definitely require the services of both kinds of officers to recover and to heal.

To the Trojanowicz model of decentralized and personalized service, professor Herman Goldstein of the University of Wisconsin contributed the S.A.R.A. model of problem solving – Scanning, Analysis, Response, and Assessment. In the hands of dedicated police innovators in the field, such as Lee Brown and Drew Diamond, these ideas began to demonstrate results, particularly in the face of the explosion of street

violence produced by the invention of crack, which brought cocaine within the reach of the young and the poor.

Defining success in terms of solving problems

Crack clearly demonstrated the limits of a criminal justice system that focuses on catching and incarcerating the bad guy. Not only did the wave after wave of new arrests cause bottlenecks in the system, which dealers often resulted in dealers making it back to the community before the police had finished the paperwork, but neighborhoods without jobs and without hope proved that they could keep producing an infinite number of new bad boys willing to gun their way into the slots left by those put behind bars.

Just as community policing considers arrest as only one tool in law enforcement's arsenal, a community criminal justice system would view incarceration as a means and not an end. Success would be determined by asking the question, "Is the problem solved?" and not by asking how many dealers were taken off the street.

As this suggests, tactics can include a wide range of responses, including arresting street dealers, diversion programs, drug courts, organizing citizen patrols, changing environmental design to reduce anonymity, and developing educational, social, athletic, and cultural activities for young people. Solutions are limited only by the imagination of those involved and the resources of the local community.

Envisioning a community criminal justice system

Glimmers of what a community criminal justice system might look like are beginning to appear. In places such as Montgomery County, Maryland, prosecutors have become generalists, operating out of decentralized offices in the community, so that they can work closely with police and the community on issues that matter most to local residents.

In this era, when people from all walks of life feel angry and alienated from government and its representatives, moving closer to the people fulfills community policing's mandate to build trust with the consumers of their services. Cities such as New York are also experimenting with neighborhood courts, which not only dispense sanctions but which offer "one-stop shopping" for a variety of social services, including drug treatment, aimed at solving underlying problems. The proliferation of drug courts nationwide also reflects growing appreciation of tailoring the response to local concerns, another hallmark of community policing.

Like community policing, these efforts represent a watershed by allowing the community a direct opportunity to hold public institutions and their representatives directly accountable. In the post-Rodney King era, it is clear that there must be changes so that rogue elements within the system can no longer rely on anonymity.

Moreover, community policing is a results-oriented system, where Community Policing Officers must face residents every day until the problem is solved, and it is time for the same questions to be asked of prosecutors, judges, and probation and parole officers. Considering the enormity of the challenge, this smattering of worthy new efforts seems spotty and piecemeal. What is required is a compelling vision of

the future, one that captures the full potential of a community criminal justice system, based on the principles of community policing with its emphasis on collaboration and community-based problem solving.

Let us imagine an approach where police, prosecutors, courts, and corrections begin to work with each other, identifying ways to become a fully integrated system that shares both resources and responsibility. At the same time, this community criminal justice system would reach out to the communities they serve, involving them directly in identifying, prioritizing, and solving problems.

Think of the power in harnessing all this energy in service of making the community a better and safer place. In contrast, the traditional criminal justice system rests almost exclusively on a punitive model, with prevention limited to deterrence.

Yet it is clear that the increase in mandatory minimums, especially for drug crimes, has resulted in an expensive surge in the prison population, yet youth violence is on the rise and many neighborhoods remain war zones. At the same time, the disparities in sanctions between crack and cocaine continue to raise disturbing questions about issues of race and class.

A holistic approach

In place of punishment and deterrence, we could begin to craft a system based on combining community-based problem solving with the concept of restorative justice. An African proverb says that it takes an entire village to raise a child, and it is time the criminal justice system began using both the carrot and the stick in helping to keep youngsters on the right track.

If only because of the expense, we must begin to treat jail and prison space as a precious resource that should not be squandered when other solutions would not only cost less, but work better.

If we again use the example of youthful street-corner drug dealing, consider the virtues of developing a credible program of restorative community service, where the work required would help to undo the damage that drug dealing causes. Neighborhoods on their way down act like a magnet for crime and drug problems, so sanctions might include having a squad of young offenders on duty to eradicate graffiti within 24 hours after it appears, under the close supervision of the Community Policing Officer and neighborhood groups. The interaction would allow the officer to serve as a role model, at the same time that he or she would have the opportunity to learn firsthand which kids need a pat on the back and which to keep an eye on.

Heretical as it may seem, there might also be a rationale for paying the kids for their work. Not only would this still be cheaper than incarceration, teaching youngsters firsthand about the benefits of hard work has obvious merit.

Think of the potential that could be harnessed by assembling a community-based problem-solving team comprised of police, prosecutors, judges, probation and parole officers, as well as community residents, school and church leaders, and a shifting and expanding roster of other community leaders who might help. Put a hospital

administrator on the team, for example, and creative solutions to youthful drug dealing might require that young offenders work at the hospital on those horrific weekend nights when drug violence escalates. Consider the impact of having them work with crack babies.

A community criminal justice system would also mirror community policing by directly involving the community as partners in identifying and prioritizing problems, as well as in solving them. There is a public debate about setting priorities that has yet to happen. Taxpayers are beginning to see that they are paying millions of dollars to build new prison cells to keep relatively low-level drug mules behind bars for a decade or more, because of mandatory sentencing. What they may not grasp is how this impacts the fact that third-time felony rapists typically serve about seven years.

Is this what the community truly wants? How do we involve the community in discussions about the real trade-offs and priorities? What must change for average citizens to take their place at the table when decisions are made about the best use of the finite number of jail and prison beds available?

Other lessons community policing teaches

While community policing serves as a model for imagining our way to a fully realized system of community criminal justice, the history of community policing also provides a cautionary tale of the pitfalls likely to occur along the way. The first problem that must be confronted is denial – the refusal to see that the failures of the existing system demand more than minor reforms.

I am reminded of the time that the chief and top brass of a major metropolitan police department grudgingly consented to appear at a neighborhood meeting, in response to complaints that youth violence was making the area increasingly unlivable. The department put on an impressive show, with graphs and charts, to prove how hard they were working and to demonstrate how many arrests they were making. It was clear that the department was more interested in telling than in listening. Finally, a woman rose slowly and asked, "Chief, if you guys are doing such a great job, would you be willing to have your family spend one night at my house?"

Another lesson that the history of community policing teaches is to expect a virulent internal backlash. For some, so massive a change implies a total rejection of their life's work. Others resist – and resent -- being asked to do a job different than the one for which they were hired. Some have philosophical disagreements with a problem-solving approach that assesses success and failure on the basis of community satisfaction. Others rankle at the thought of working directly with people who live in troubled neighborhoods, often because of elitism, outright racism, or an "us versus them" attitude based on the belief that everyone who lives in such neighborhoods either commits or condones the crime and violence.

Some police agencies have attempted to avoid backlash by embracing all of the ideas and principles associated with community policing – except for direct involvement of the community. Research conducted by the National Center for Community Policing, in conjunction with the FBI's Behavioral Science Section, showed that only one out of four police agencies that claimed to be doing community policing also identified

themselves as involving the community in identifying, prioritizing, and solving problems.

Some would argue that this means community policing can be done without the community – but those who see what community participation can do recognize that as a copout. While community policing has had a checkered record of success in dealing with backlash, experience suggests that the solution requires developing a comprehensive plan to confront it.

Leadership means educating everyone about the reasons for the change. Practice the principles internally – involve key stakeholders in all phases of decision-making. Adopt a policy of open discussion about questions and concerns. Consider a phased implementation – a series of baby steps. As Bob Trojanowicz would say, "The key is to keep enough tension on the line without yanking so hard that it snaps."

Ultimately, however, the commitment must be so clear that the resisters get the message – either they embrace the change or go.

When we reflect on the internal dissension that community policing inevitably engenders, the challenge of implementing a fully integrated system of community criminal justice seems even more daunting. How many judges will spend the time to listen to community complaints? What about the inevitable turf battles? How can such a disparate problem-solving group ever reach consensus? How do we ensure that the voice of the community will be heard? Can community justice be accomplished within existing resources?

The potential for problems multiplies exponentially when we add the threat of external backlash. Will the impetus be undone by politicians who promise voters a quick fix? Will legislators be willing to become part of the team? With a media addicted to 10-second soundbites, how will average citizens learn about the trade-offs? Will affluent citizens, living in walled communities with private security guards, support a system that promotes risk-taking and innovation in low-income and minority neighborhoods?

As a society, have we matured to the point where we understand that sending people to prison does not mean throwing them away -- that we must find better ways to reclaim and reintegrate those who will again live among us?

Even that cursory list of questions would inspire pessimism, if not for the fact that it is clear that the existing system require more than tinkering at the margins. On the one hand is the ugly vision of the repressive police state, with ever-increasing numbers of its citizens behind bars – and the inevitable specter of civil unrest. On the other is a democratic, community criminal justice system, where the people with the most to gain or lose accept the rights and responsibilities of collaborative decision-making. And just like democracy, community criminal justice is likely to be a slower and sloppier system, with obvious drawbacks – except that it is better than any other. The choice is clear -- and the time grows short.