

THE COMMUNITY POLICING SERIES

Restructuring police priorities: police chiefs must take the lead

by Robert Trojanowicz and Bonnie Bucqueroux

The police are hailed as the most democratic government agency - report an armed intruder breaking in and no matter whether you are the president of General Motors or an unemployed autoworker, a patrol car will speed to your door. The police take justifiable pride in being the only social agency open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, ready to make house calls to protect the lives and property of everyone in the community.

Yet studies show that only about 3% of calls to the police involve a crime in progress. How can the police maintain the capacity to respond immediately to true emergencies without saying no to others?

Complicating matters further is that police do not operate in a vacuum. Restructuring police priorities can require new ordinances, which injects local politics into the process. Consider, for example, the growing problem posed by home security systems, those expensive devices that the poor cannot afford, though they may well need them the most.

In the vast majority of cases, when a burglar alarm goes off, the police hurry to the scene only to find the device malfunctioned or an embarrassed owner triggered the call by mistake. The police cannot ignore any alarm, if only because of potential liability, even if they have raced to false alarms at the same address many times before.

In most communities, a false alarm incurs no penalty. But as of last January in affluent Meridian Township outside Lansing, Michigan, the first false alarm now costs residents or business owners \$25, \$50 for the second, up to \$100 per call for the rest of the year.

With only 33 officers to police a community of 38,000, township officials recognized the more than 1,000 false alarm runs last year threatened to stretch the police dangerously thin. The new fines not only act as a deterrent, they also extract a user "tax" that helps defray the actual cost.

Another chronic problem involves people who have locked themselves out of their cars. Compare Detroit, where the police send a patrol car if one is available (their basic policy on all non-emergency requests), with its suburb, Dearborn Heights, where the police dispatch tow trucks from companies whose contracts with the city include providing this service at no direct cost to the motorist. Ninety miles west, in Lansing, the police have gone even further, limiting their help to naming locksmiths willing to do the job for a fee.

Is lockout service a good way to make friends - or a misuse of a well-paid, highly trained officers time?

A thorny decision the police face is how far to go in serving the business community. In Newport News, Virginia, analysis confirmed that numerous calls involved gas station patrons who sped away without paying. Even when the police caught the culprits, station managers routinely refused to press charges - the police were their unpaid bill collectors.

The department held a meeting with owners and managers urging them to switch to a system where customers pay in advance, but this was rejected as bad for business. So the police have adopted a policy where they send a car only if the caller agrees to press charges. But what about the angry business owners who claim that the extra taxes they pay justify better service? And what about the customer who honestly forgot to pay who now faces arrest?

Also at issue is whether distinctions should be made between struggling small business owners and major corporations, particularly those who enjoy local tax breaks. In Aurora, Colorado, the police now refuse to handle obscene phone call complaints until the telephone company has identified a suspect. The department's rationale is that private corporations can more easily pass along the costs to the consumer than the public police. But does the terrified female victim living alone understand? And will new policies survive if powerful companies lobby city officials?

Aurora has made a department-side commitment to Community Policing, and this almost always demands restructuring police priorities. To free officers for permanent beat assignments in the community, many departments are forced to eliminate some services and to increase the response time on non-emergency calls. Yet we also see departments making those same changes even when they aren't in the process of adopting Community Policing. How much heat does Community Policing deserve for changes that may be inevitable anyhow?

Many departments, whether or not they have adopted Community Policing, find themselves frustrated by the need to spend so much time verifying insurance losses. Most crimes go unreported, and studies show many people call the police only to secure a police report to file a claim. Some departments now ask those who suffer fenderbenders to drive to the station where a civilian staffer can issue a report. Others now take stolen car reports by phone. Yet many middle-class taxpayers feel this sends a message that the police don't care.

During his first year as chief in Alexandria, Virginia, Gary Leonard spent almost all his spare time telling civic groups about the urgent need to reform police priorities to implement Community Policing. He argued that maintaining a system with sufficient capacity to send a patrol car immediately to every property crime where the perpetrator had fled robbed him of the flexibility to involve officers in new efforts, such as those designed to keep drugs out of schools.

Frustrated reformer Leonard recently resigned to take a new job. At the Community Policing & Drug Conference, Alexandria Mayor James Moran, Jr., voiced his concerns that these reforms ask the people who pay the biggest share of local taxes to accept cuts in the police services they are most likely to use.

Moran said that many voters are already angry that the police spend a disproportionate share of their time with the poor. Middle- and upper-class citizens are the most likely to

vote, pay taxes, and contribute to political campaigns. Why would elected officials risk their careers by asking these influential citizens to accept changes that reduce their level of police service?

Maybe the real bottom line is whether a community is merely a collection of competing interest groups, fighting each other for slices of an all-too-often shrinking pie. If so, the poorest and most crime- and drug-riddled neighborhoods with the least clout will always lose.

Moran, a self-described "liberal" in the Kennedy mold, likened Community Policing to the failed War on Poverty programs of the past. On the other hand, some "conservatives" have voiced fears that Community Policing's ability to "empower" people in the communities could mean the police would fall captive to militant activists, including groups like the Black Panthers. While Community Policing has so far received broad bi-partisan support, it can also attract partisan fire.

What we must recognize is that the rising tide of drugs and violence in troubled neighborhoods ultimately threatens us all - and people know that. Surveys consistently show voters care the most about crime and drugs - keys locked in cars and fenderbenders aren't even on the list.

Yet instead of explaining the real trade-offs, politicians too often pander for votes with 30-second hot-button ads that appeal to our fears, not our aspirations. What choice do voters truly have when candidates of all political stripes manipulate the issues surrounding crime and drugs to divide us into warring factions?

Voters must support candidates with the political courage to tell us that, like it or not, we will all rise or fall together - rich, poor, middle class, regardless of color. Politicians once elected must also be willing to take the heat when someone, even a major campaign contributor, calls to complain about less-than-instant police service for a less-than-urgent call.

Police professionals must also work together to explore ways to persuade politicians that Community Policing is the best solution to their real problem, which is convincing their constituents that they have an effective plan to combat crime, drugs, fear of crime, and community decay. While Community Policing may imply sacrifice for some, the minimal inconvenience is a small price to pay, if it succeeds in reducing the climate of violence and fear that threatens to consume us.

At the conference, England's Sir Stanley Bailey marveled that police chiefs in the United States can accomplish anything, since they average only 3 1/2 years in any one job. In a later session, someone from the audience suggested that police chiefs could turn this negative into a plus by recognizing that they might as well risk their careers by speaking out on crucial issues. Police chiefs could play an important new leadership role by educating the general public about what it will really take to turn troubled communities around. Chiefs should use their credibility in the community to lobby for prevention - better schools, improved health care, family support, new jobs. Chiefs can also use their bully pulpit to educate people that arrests alone will not solve the current drug crisis - and explore ways to enlist support from local politicians as well.

Any change implies resistance, and Community Policing by definition also includes the opportunity to make mistakes. But reaching out to law-abiding people and giving them a stake in the police process does not mean the police will shift their allegiance away from upholding the law, nor does it mean they are insensitive to their middle- and upper-class constituents' needs. Community Policing simply restructures police priorities in ways that provide the entire community the best chance of making us safer, by helping to make all neighborhoods more crime- and drug-resistant in years to come.

This is an expanded version of an editorial that appeared in the Detroit News in May of 1990.