

Community Policing Is Homeland Security

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For the past decade, community policing reformers have struggled to replace the image of police as warriors battling the bad guys to proactive problem solvers working as partners with the community. Now the militarists within police circles are capitalizing on fears of terrorism to argue for going "back to basics" - no more "touchy-feely" policing in the face of this new threat.

The danger, however, is that retreating from community policing not only risks reversing hard-won gains in reducing violent crime, but it would become even more difficult for police to find the terrorists among us.

There is no quick military fix for the problems in our communities. The vision of heroic U.S. soldiers hunting down Osama bin Laden is not the model to deal with chronic problems of spousal battering, child abuse, and gangs of kids battling for street-level drug turf. Inflicting collateral damage may be an unavoidable consequence on the battlefield, but it has no place in a democratic society.

In our cities and towns, one person's "evildoer" is someone else's father, mother, son or daughter, and missing the target could well mean the police battering ram comes through your door.

Community-based collaboration

What works with civilian policing is creating community collaborations that address the underlying dynamics that allow problems to persist. In the case of domestic violence, for example, we need officers who can enlist a team of victim advocates, drug treatment specialists, school officials, members of the faith community, even neighbors. Addressing low-level drug dealing benefits from mobilizing the entire community, with police as the catalyst and as protectors for people as they regain control of their own streets.

Now we face the new challenge of identifying "sleeper" agents among us. We may never succeed in inserting anyone into a secret terrorist cell, so police must instead try to stitch together shreds of information from the law-abiding people in the community who cross the terrorists' path and notice something amiss.

Our goal should therefore be to provide as many opportunities as possible for people to tell police what they know, without singling themselves out for retaliation. A topless dancer reportedly called police months before the attack on the World Trade Center to relay her concerns about disturbing papers she saw in the motel room of a man who may have been Mohammed Atta. We want people from all walks of life to trust police enough to place the call, and we also need officers who will listen. Neither will happen if the police become an occupying army.

The military model depends on covert actions to extract information from the enemy. Community policing instead enlists the open support of average citizens as the department's unpaid eyes and ears in the communities that they know best. It promotes respect for diversity as an antidote to racial profiling that will further alienate the people whose participation the police need.

The danger of moving backward

Why are so many departments misusing the current crisis to jettison community policing? For one thing, it's harder to do. Officers need training to work with a broad cross-section of other professionals and community residents on building consensus for short- and long-term initiatives. Supervisors must learn to rely less on control and more on coaching, and the traditional top-down system must change to reward collaboration and innovation at the grassroots level.

Community policing has enemies, especially among those who chose the career with the view of police as the experts with the power to impose their solutions. It takes time and repeated evidence of community policing's success to bring them on board, and many police departments have not yet fully completed the transition. Unfortunately as well, community policing has been sold to the public simply as putting more officers on the street, not as community-based problem solving.

Few people outside the field know about the pitched battle for the heart and soul of policing that has raged the past decade. It is said that people get the police they deserve. If we are to maintain recent reductions in violent crime and uncover the terrorists living among us, while preserving the civil rights that make our society special, we must insist on community policing now more than ever.