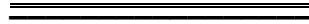


**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**



Community Engagement in Policing



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ABSTRACT

Policing in the United States faces a serious public relations problem. There is a lack of trust between the police and the public resulting in poor police – community relations. A study done by the Pew Research shows that there is a disconnect between the perceptions of the public and of police in regard to the work of police (Morin, Parker, Stepler, & Mercer, 2017). Much of this perception problem is due to a lack of engagement by the police into the communities that they serve. Law enforcement agencies need to find ways to engage with the communities they serve that shows the police service in a positive light and improves relations with the citizens they serve. Therefore, police services should foster community engagement to improve police – community relations.

There are several advantages to police services fostering an atmosphere of community engagement. One advantage is that it improves the process of providing solutions to the problems which the citizens and the police are seeing in the community. This leads to a reduction in crime, disorder, and anti-social behavior because these problems are being addressed in collaboration with the community. When the police services are successful in addressing the problems that they and the community are identifying during the engagement process, the community's perception of police will be better, and the community will be more willing to support an increase in the availability of resources to the police services. For all of this to work successfully however requires a commitment by the police agency, the individual officers, and the community. And when done successfully, the result will be improved police – community relations.

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INTRODUCTION

With the poor perception of the police service, law enforcement agencies need to find ways to engage with the communities they serve that shows the police service in a positive light and improves relations with the citizens they serve. The United States Department of Justice defines community policing this way: “Community policing is a philosophy that focuses on crime and social disorder through the delivery of police services that includes aspects of traditional law enforcement, as well as prevention, problem-solving, community engagement, and partnerships” (Docobo, 2005, “Community-oriented policing” section, para. 1). An important aspect of that definition is community engagement. Without it, law enforcement agencies will be mostly reactive and will lack the full support of the community in which they serve. Community engagement can be described as how a law enforcement agency and the community develop continuing relationships in order to have a beneficial, shared vision for the community (Miller et al., 2015).

However, due to the current state of police – community relations, it is hard to enter into these collaborative relationships due to mistrust and antipathy from both sides. A poll conducted in 2016 by the Pew Research Center focusing on police and public perceptions shows that about 86% of officers say that the public does not understand the risks and challenges of a police officer’s job, but when the public is asked the same question, 83% believe they do understand the risks and challenges (Morin, Parker, Stepler, & Mercer, 2017). This seems to be a large disconnect in the perceptions held by the police and the public in regard to the job of policing. Further enhancing that disconnect, 31% of police see their job as that of a protector while 29%

of the public see it as that of an enforcer (Morin et al., 2017). Considering race relations, there is another disconnect. The Pew poll shows that 67% of police officers view deaths of blacks during police encounters in recent years as isolated incidents. In contrast, 60% of the public views the deaths as a sign of a broader problem (Morin et al., 2017). All of this goes to show that police services and the public need to do a better job of engaging with each other so they can better understand what the role of each is when it comes to policing their communities.

Community engagement is the process of allowing citizens and police services to work together and encouraging those relationships where information and assurance can be exchanged by having the community help to identify and implement solutions to local problems. These ideas then can be implemented in the strategic planning process (College of Policing, 2013). This should be an essential component that impacts every aspect of the police service and requires a genuine commitment. It ensures that police services meet local and individuals needs which will increase public satisfaction and enable more inclusive and accessible services (College of Policing, 2013).

If law enforcement agencies are looking to improve the relations with the communities they serve, then they should seriously consider in engaging together. It takes involvement on both sides, communities actively engaging with the police and the police engaging with the community. This must not only take place on an organizational level but just as much on the individual level. Myhill and Bradford (2013), in their study of overcoming cop culture stated, “perceptions of fair treatment by the organization are predictive of positive attitudes toward serving the public. This relationship is mediated by alignment with community policing – a process-based style of policing that

emphasizes community engagement and partnership” (p. 339). In this regard, it is shown that law enforcement agencies should foster community engagement to improve police – community relations.

POSITION

Firstly, a law enforcement agency that fosters community engagement will see improved problem-solving due to an increased confidence in the police service and an established relationship with the police. Myhill (2012) states, “Problem-solving is widely regarded as a key part of community engagement in policing” and law enforcement agencies “cannot really claim to be doing community policing unless they are adopting a problem-solving approach” (p. 47). According to Sherman and Eck (2002), problem-solving alone though cannot work and that it must be combined with increasing police legitimacy – how responsive the police are to the public’s needs (as cited in Myhill, 2012).

The most widely accepted model for problem-solving is “SARA”, which stands for the four different phases of scanning, analysis, response, and assessment (Forrest, Myhill, & Tilley, 2005). The community can be involved in any of the SARA phases. The benefits of community engagement in the area of problem-solving include developing police – community partnerships and reducing the demand for police services (Myhill, 2012).

One of the more successful initiatives involving community engagement and problem-solving come from Newport News Police Department in Newport News, Virginia (Myhill, 2012). According to Moore (2000), the initiative sought to reduce prostitution, robbery, theft, and burglaries in certain areas of the city (as cited in Myhill,

2012). In the evaluation of those initiatives it was shown that the number of prostitutes dropped by 79%, robberies dropped by 43%, thefts from automobiles dropped by greater than 50%, and burglaries were reduced by 35% (Myhill, 2012). The success of the initiative was attributed to the involvement of the community (Myhill, 2012). Another area that community engagement led to improved problem-solving was in Chicago. In an evaluation of the Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy (CAPS), Skogan showed that out of the 15 areas in Chicago that were engaged with the community, nine of the areas were doing a good job of implementing the problem-solving model (as cited in Myhill, 2012).

Secondly, a law enforcement agency that fosters community engagement will see a reduction in crime, reduction in disorder and anti-social behavior, and increased feelings of safety in the community. When one looks to see the success of any community engagement, one of the principle areas is in the reduction of crime and victimization rates. From a study of Chicago's Alternative Policing Strategy (CAPS), Skogan (2004) reported that there was a significant reduction in crime over a ten-year period and attributed the reduction to the increase in community engagement initiatives that lead to an increase in "the prevention and intervention capacities in Chicago's neighborhoods" (as cited in Myhill, 2012, p. 40). In an evaluation of the National Reassurance Policing Program (NRPP) in England, Tuffin (2006) indicated that self-reported victimization fell 10% in areas where community engagement was practiced (as cited in Myhill, 2012). It is further interesting to report that Tuffin (2006) also showed that the public's perception that the crime rate had decreased had significantly risen by 15% (as cited in Myhill, 2012).

Disorder and anti-social behavior is another aspect of the public's perception in the reduction of crime. Community engagement helps in this area as well. In the evaluation of CAPS, Skogan (2004) showed that disorder and anti-social behavior had dropped, especially in the African American communities where the drop was significant (as cited in Myhill, 2012). Public perceptions of a decrease of disorder and anti-social behavior was also seen in the NRPP, which led to a positive program effect (Myhill, 2012).

The public feeling safer and having less fear is another perception that is evaluated in the overall effect on crime in areas where community engagement is being practiced. The most impressive evidence of this was in Chicago during the ten-year implementation of CAPS. Skogan showed that fear was down by 10% among men and young people, 17% among White people, and 20% among African Americans, women, and older people (as cited in Myhill, 2012). People just felt safer overall in their neighborhoods due to the community engagement initiatives being implemented.

Thirdly, a law enforcement agency that fosters community engagement will see an increase in the availability of resources, to include financial and personnel resources. It is of no surprise that law enforcement agencies across the nation are having to endure shrinking budgets, with some agencies looking at a reduction to their budgets of more than 15% (Friend & Martinez, 2014). Usually, the first things to be cut from an agency's budget are prevention and education programs. However, many agencies are finding that community engagement programs and initiatives add value to their agencies. This value then can be leveraged due to the strong relationships that are made between the police services, community groups, and local businesses, which can

make it easier when asking for bond approvals and tax increases to help fund law enforcement (Friend & Martinez, 2014).

Another area where law enforcement agencies can see community engagement initiatives increase the availability of financial and personnel resources is through grants. Since 1995, the United States Department of Justice (USDOJ) (2016) has awarded over \$14 billion in grants through its Community Oriented Policing Services. In 2016, the USDOJ issued grant funding in the amount of \$119 million for hiring entry-level law enforcement officers, with the Dallas Police Department received \$3.1 million to hire 25 officers. These are resources that will help the awarded agencies to engage with the communities that they serve.

One area that cannot be overlooked in discussing increased resources due to law enforcement agencies utilizing community engagement is political capital. Friend and Martinez (2014) argue that agencies should consider themselves a political organization since they are the highest-profile department within local governments and take a large portion of the budget. For this reason, agencies should not ignore that fact that relationships with elected officials need to be cultivated, which is best handled by engaging with them just as one would with the greater community. Friend and Martinez (2014) quoted Cynthia Mathews, the mayor of Santa Cruz, California, “elected officials need to have a solid, honest understanding of departmental strengths and challenges. This can only happen if there are solid relationships and open communication between the department and elected, based on trust and shared goals” p. 107).

COUNTER ARGUMENTS

A law enforcement agency may find it difficult to foster community engagement due to a lack of willingness of the community to engage with the police service. The two most important reasons why communities do not engage with law enforcement agencies are that they do not feel that they have an actual say in policing and that any input they do have would not have an impact on police decision-making (Myhill, 2012). The quality of the community engagement initiative was also a factor that indicated the willingness of the community to participate. In looking at two neighborhood watch schemes in London, it was discovered that they were poorly implemented and therefore had poor community participation, and those that did participate were not dedicated to the mission of the neighborhood watch (Myhill, 2012).

Conversely, it can be shown that if law enforcement agencies give the communities they serve a voice into police decision-making and work tirelessly to make sure that community engagement initiatives are properly implemented and supported then communities will engage. In a study conducted in 1997 and again in 2002, community participation in community engagement initiatives increased by 38% (Myhill, 2012). The study also shows that some of the more popular methods of securing community participation is through the use of public meetings, door knocking, and local police – community stations or ‘storefronts’ (Myhill, 2012). Skogan (1999) found that public meetings held in areas with already existing community networks were better and attended and were more representative of the community (as cited in Myhill, 2012).

A law enforcement agency may also find it difficult to foster community engagement due to a lack of willingness of the law enforcement officers to engage with

the community. Community engagement initiatives place a lot of responsibility on first-line officers. These initiatives can lead officers to feel helplessness and a loss of control in regards to the demand of their jobs and then lead to a lack of support for the initiatives and a failure to see the benefit of the initiatives to the law enforcement organization and to the officers themselves (Bower, 2015). In one survey conducted by the Fairfax County Police Department, officers had varying degrees of feelings surrounding community engagement initiatives, going from some officers feeling that their entire job revolved around the initiatives to some officers not even knowing that the department had community engagement initiatives or what those initiatives were (Bower, 2015).

However, other research shows that when law enforcement agencies take the time to explain and train their officers in the community engagement initiatives, the officers will be supportive of the initiatives and their role in implementing them. In a study of 10 major community policing programs, positive results were seen in officer's job satisfaction, perceptions of the police role, improved interaction as well as confidence in the community, and relationships with colleagues (Myhill, 2012). The study further showed that from the law enforcement perspective, there were "increases in job satisfaction and motivation; a broadening of the police role; improvements in relationships with co-workers and citizens; and greater expectations regarding community participation in crime prevention efforts" (Myhill, 2012, p. 41).

It is important to note that for successful participation of law enforcement officers in community engagement initiatives, command staff and supervisors must support and encourage the officers. This will lead to the officers to be able to identify a need and

find a solution that builds positive community relationships and partnerships (Cognac, 2015). One example of this occurred in Evansville, Indiana where problems at an annual basketball tournament were getting out of hand (Cognac, 2015). The tournament was cancelled after a particularly violent year. However, community groups approached the police department, wanting to partner with the police department to bring back the basketball tournament. Instead of the police department being there in a solely enforcement role, police officers and other criminal justice professionals actually played in the tournament and interacted with the other teams and the tournament was a big success with no problems. This is an example of a police department engaging with the community in a non-enforcement role and successfully building relationships with groups that would normally be distrustful of the police (Cognac, 2015).

RECOMMENDATION

It is important for law enforcement agencies to improve police – community relations and must foster community engagement initiatives to accomplish this task. There are many opportunities for community engagement and should seek not only the community's participation, but also the participation of the law enforcement agency to include first-line officers. This could include public meetings, door-to-door contacts, hosting community events, and involvement with community organizations and, if appropriate, faith-based organizations.

However, these initiatives, as far as the law enforcement agency are concerned, will not be successful if there is no support. This support first needs to take the form of command staff and supervisors being supportive of the initiatives and encouraging first-line officers to not only participate, but also take the lead in planning and organizing

some of these initiatives. By doing this, the officers will be a part of the community that they serve instead of separate from the community (Kappler & Gaines, 2014). In fact, the concern of lack of willingness of officer participation is one of the arguments against fostering community engagement. But it was shown that as long as the officers feel supported and understand the importance of what they are doing, they will support it and will be more satisfied in their jobs.

The lack of willingness of the community to participate in community engagement initiatives is another counter. Some researchers claim that communities fail to participate because they feel that their voices do not get heard and that there is a lack of commitment from the law enforcement agencies to integrate community input when the agencies are developing services and priorities. However, research shows as long as the communities feel they do have a say, they do participate in the initiatives.

When both the law enforcement agency and the community are willing to participate in community engagement initiatives and develop strong relationships, problem-solving is improved which leads to reduction in crime and disorder and anti-social behavior. As well, these strong relationships lead to an increase in the availability of financial and personnel resources. This is because these strong partnerships lead to political capital and grant opportunities which puts money in budgets for more community initiatives and more officers on the street to engage with the community to solve local problems. Ultimately, that is the mission of every law enforcement agency. This will improve police community relations.

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