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**Geographic Decentralization of Field Command**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The geographic decentralization of field command in large municipal police departments assigns command personnel operational responsibility around the clock in specific portions of the agencies jurisdiction. Geographic decentralization results in a number of problems for large municipal police agencies due to the lack of on-duty leadership and the conflicting interests of the various districts. A multivariate study methodology was used to determine the effectiveness of geographic decentralization and the feasibility of the ongoing utilization of geographic decentralization. The multivariate study determined that many of the criticisms of traditional police structure, that lead to the evolution of geographic decentralization, have been found to have little or no basis. Further, the study indicates that the geographic decentralization of command does not facilitate effective police operations as intended. Ironically, geographic decentralization actually serves to further complicate police operations, making them less effective. The research conclusions include an assertion that many agencies have returned to traditional command structures, which utilize crime specific approaches to real time problem solving initiatives. The study also includes a recommendation that agencies continuing to pursue geographic decentralization have appropriate levels of command within their rank structures to guarantee effective field operations.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this paper is to review the geographic decentralization of field command, which assigns police commanders operational responsibility around the clock in specific portions of an agencies jurisdiction. This differs from the traditional command structure that assigns commanders the supervision of officers and sergeants working specific shifts. Waco police commanders assigned duties based on the geographic decentralization of field command are responsible for one hundred sixty-eight hours of field operations in their districts weekly. District commanders have authority to manage operations within their districts. However, since their work schedules often differ from the sergeants and officers under their command the sergeants must act autonomously regarding operational matters. Sergeants are frequently left with limited guidance in the application of departmental policy. The lack of leadership created by the geographic decentralization of field command has resulted in less effective field operations.

The purpose of this research is to ascertain if the decentralization of field command based on geography is a sound police management principle for the Waco police department. This research should also determine at what level of supervision, if any, the geographic decentralization of field command would be ideal for the Waco police department. Ideally, the multivariate study regarding the command structure of modern police agencies and private sector entities will provide a basis for the assessment of the geographic decentralization of command in Waco. The methods of inquiry used for this research will include: a review of periodicals, written materials, publications, and web sites.

Interviews will be conducted via public telephone with personnel working in agencies currently or formerly structured using the geographic decentralization philosophy. The findings (anticipated to be the result of this research) propose that the Waco police department, which has adopted a geographic decentralization of field command, should move toward a shift command system using geographic intelligence systems. The implications of this research are that police agencies currently operating under the geographic decentralization of field command will have more effective operations and improved morale if their community oriented command structure continues to evolve beyond the geographic decentralization of field command.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

During the last several decades traditional models of policing have come under increased scrutiny by criminal justice academics and law enforcement practitioners. Theories regarding traditional police procedures and organizational structures have been challenged resulting not only in the criticism of standard operating procedures such as routine random patrol but also in the development of new philosophies homogeneously referred to as community policing. A total of 35 community policing training centers, numerous training seminars, and standard requirements made community oriented policing the standard police practice in the 1990s (Hassell, 2003). As part of the community policing movement some Criminal justice academics have advocated the decentralization of large municipal police agencies.

Centralization is the degree to which decision making within an organization is concentrated. The opposite of centralization is decentralization, or shared decision-making, and it is one of the hallmarks of community policing (Maguire, 2003). When

Moore and his colleagues (Moore et al., 1992) assembled a panel of policing experts to study police innovation, the panel rated “geographic decentralization” (akin to spatial differentiation) as the second most important administrative innovation in policing, second only to improving education and training of police officers.

Spatial differentiation is the degree to which an organization divides its work and its workers over space. Although the term “spatial differentiation” is not usually used in community policing discourse, its essence is the very heart of community policing (Maguire, 2003). One suggested approach to the geographic decentralization of large municipal police agencies, often referred to as delayerization, was to reduce the number of ranks in police organizations. In fact, only 12 of the 383 largest police agencies (that is, municipal agencies with 100 or more full-time sworn officers) in the USA in 1993 for which data is available had more than seven command ranks. These 383 agencies had a mean and median of six command ranks.

Current advocates of community policing continue to urge police executives to bypass or trim layers from their agency rank structures in order to better implement community policing (King, 2003). Community policing reformers have urged police agencies to reduce the height of their hierarchies to improve the flow of communication throughout the organization. Height is the amount of social space from the bottom to the top of the organization (Maguire, 2003). Tall rank structures are believed to impede overall organizational or group performance, such as slowing organizational response to external changes (Sparrow, 1998).

One traditional policing approach that corresponds to geographic decentralization, often referred to as the geographic policing model, dictates that officers should be

assigned to specific geographic areas for extended periods of time. This type of geographic assignment is believed to allow officers opportunities to develop relationships within that segment of the community and knowledge of the area that will allow the officer to recognize problems and take effective action to address those problems. The geographic policing model appears to have greatly benefited the police in community relations. Assignments based on beats rather than shifts helped officers feel an ownership for the areas they patrolled and made them feel accountable for the area's activity (TELEMASP, 1998). Additionally the geographic policing model allows officers opportunities to incorporate the core values of their organizations into their daily operations.

The police departments with a service orientation emphasize community residents' satisfaction as a major organizational goal. Accordingly, police officers take requests for both law enforcement and order maintenance seriously (Hassell, 2003). The challenge of assigning the responsibility for a specific geographic area among officers working different shifts and days of the week suggested the need for a unified command of those officers. This need lead community-policing philosophers to suggest that all officers assigned to a specific geographic area should be placed under the supervision of a single person thereby accomplishing the geographic decentralization of field operations.

Traditionally, officers working on the same shift within several contiguous beats would be grouped together into squads assigned to a geographic district. This type of squad concept would assign a first line supervisor, usually a sergeant, to supervise each squad. If an agency's jurisdiction were large enough to require more than one squad to work on the same shift they would be assigned under a shift commander, usually a

lieutenant, who would oversee ongoing operations during the shift. This traditional approach is not only evident in the public sector but in the private sector as well.

Divisions with related operations are often organized in groups, headed by corporate-level executives responsible for managing synergies between divisions within their groups. Alternatively, if divisions compete for resources or capabilities, we take that as evidence of unrelated diversification. Division-level executives lead the organizations as stand-alone businesses; the corporate office typically exerts strong financial oversight but rarely intervenes in divisional affairs (Raynor & Bower, 2001). Although some agencies have jurisdictions large enough to require multiple shift commanders most agencies have smaller jurisdictions and require only a single shift commander to oversee ongoing field operations. The geographic decentralization of operational responsibility lead some to suggest the traditional shift commanders should be transformed into district commanders.

During the 1990's many agencies (i.e. the Arlington, Texas police department) moved toward geographic decentralization. In Arlington, a Lieutenant's responsibility expanded with the inception of the Geographic Policing Model. Rather than being responsible for just a shift they became responsible for a geographic area 24 hours a day. The sergeant's job duties in Arlington also changed from a shift to a geographic area. One sergeant was assigned to each of the three beats within the lieutenant's geographic area. Although the three sergeants had different shifts they were given the flexibility to switch and/or alter their shift times with one another. This allowed them to have a better knowledge of their area and an opportunity to communicate with personnel assigned to other shifts. Although sergeants were given flexibility to modify their shifts it was



difficult to maintain proper coverage because of days off and vacation time (TELEMASP, 1998).

The geographic decentralization of field command gave rise to a number of relevant issues. One such issue was the need to determine at which level of supervision the responsibility for the ongoing operations of the agency would be assigned and at what level of supervision would the geographic decentralization of command fall. In Arlington, Texas all command level personnel worked as shift commanders on a rotational basis in addition to their regular assigned duties. However Gaston County, North Carolina is perhaps a better example of the standard approach to geographic decentralization. Zone commanders, who are usually assigned to day work, depend on the corps of sergeants to manage the evenings and serve as the new “watch commanders” (Farley, 2001).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The author’s goal in conducting this multivariate research is to produce an answer to the research question: At which level of supervision, if any, would the geographic decentralization of field command be effective within the Waco police department. The author’s purpose is to establish the value of, and need for a thorough review of the geographic decentralization of field command to facilitate the further evolution of community oriented policing. The author hypothesizes that this research will confirm that both officers and law enforcement agencies will benefit from a thorough analysis of the geographic decentralization of field command in large municipal police departments. Additionally, the author contends that this study will also affirm that as a result of the application of geographic decentralization in some agencies their field operations are less

effective than those agencies operating under traditional command structures. Having established these results through research, the author ultimately hopes that the rank at which the geographic decentralization of field command is practical within the Waco police department will be determined. Additionally, data from three hundred eighty-three large municipal police agencies in the United States will be analyzed to obtain statistics regarding the percentage of agencies currently employing rank structures with more than five levels of social height. The author surmises that to effectively administer the geographic decentralization of field command within the Waco police department an additional tier is needed within the rank structure of the agency.

## **FINDINGS**

Community policing advocates have aggressively encouraged police agencies to pursue geographic decentralization without regard to the height or size of the organizations. It is not clear exactly how tall an organization must be to be considered “tall”, yet critics assumed nonetheless that police organizations were too tall (King, 2003). Research on the relationship between the environment and structural arrangements demonstrated that organization size is often the most important factor in shaping police organizations (Hassell, 2003). Police agencies committed to community policing often focus on problem solving in the hope of producing effective outcomes. Effective problem solving initiatives should include a thorough understanding of organizational structure and how it impacts the achievement of organizational goals.

Organizational structure is the formal apparatus through which organizations accomplish two core activities: the division of labor and the coordination of work (Maguire, 2003). Proponents of geographic decentralization have focused on the division

of labor component of organizational structure. The traditional police organizational structure has been viewed as an impediment to adopting innovations and producing effective outcomes. However, experts in organizational structure offer counter points to that belief when large or tall organizations are discussed.

Communication appears to be impeded by rank structure in smaller groups but is unaffected by rank structure in larger groups, as evident with group effectiveness. Overall, police rank structure shares a very modest relationship with the adoption of innovations, with taller police agencies showing a greater likelihood to have management oriented administrative innovations. There is no evidence, however, that taller police agencies are less innovative. Further, rank structure shared no relationship with a department's adoption of community policing. Conversely, students of police organizations have noted two possible benefits of tall rank structure: increased coordination and control, and greater rewards for police employees. It appears that rank structure impedes the performance of small groups (of roughly less than five members). In larger groups (roughly ten or more members) rank structure either improves performance or has no effect (King, 2003).

The impact geographic decentralization has had on the second component of organizational structure, the coordination of work, has not received the depth of analysis this issue needs. Agencies considering geographic decentralization must determine, among other issues, how effective they can reasonably expect their first line supervisors to be while operating autonomously. Under geographic decentralization first line supervisors are left with the task of balancing the real time problem solving duties of their districts with the operational responsibilities of their shifts. This can result in

conflict between first line supervisors from different districts, who are working on the same shifts, to provide effective service to the portions of the city they are tasked with serving.

In Gaston county one problem with the ownership of a zone was the “disownership” of the other two zones. This problem has been singularly addressed through specific and direct orders from the chief. Manpower and resources are both so limited that zone boundaries cannot become obstacles to sharing and cooperation. The zones and officers assigned to different zones, still rely upon one another (Farley, 2001).

An endemic issue in encouraging and promoting proactive methods was managing the number of calls for service (TELEMASP, 1998). The potential for this type of conflict between supervisors from different districts will exist within any police agency operating under a geographic decentralization of command responsibility. Private sector organizations have also experienced the effects of diverging concerns competing for limited resources. In creating strategic flexibility, a corporate office must balance the immediate need for divisional autonomy with the potential need for future cooperation. Without this balance, divisions may act in ways that advance their current competitiveness but undermine opportunities to collaborate in the future (Raynor & Bower, 2001).

Many agencies that have embraced the geographic decentralization philosophy have determined there is still a need for on duty command personnel. To meet the need for on-duty command personnel some of those agencies developed a watch commander system by which various members of the agencies command staff rotate through a watch commander assignment. This type of watch command duty is virtually identical to that

of the traditional shift commander whose primary responsibility was to ensure the effective coordination of work. In an agency operating under a geographic decentralization of command officers often receive direction from first line supervisors assigned to different districts that is contradictory to the direction given by their own chain of command. In the absence of on-duty commanders first line supervisors in these agencies are left to facilitate operational matters based on their understanding or interpretation of the directives given them by the district commanders under whose command they are assigned even when overseeing operations in other districts.

Focusing on the division of labor rather than the coordination of work does not facilitate the most effective utilization of resources. The concept that random patrol does not deter crime is widely understood within the law enforcement community. However, known crime trends can and do lead to not only the deterrence of further crime but also to the apprehension of criminals themselves. As a result of the Kansas City Preventive Patrol Experiment and other studies, many believe that police efforts do not reduce crime. However, it has recently been proven that focused police efforts can make a difference (Hoover 1998). These focused police efforts are termed crime-specific strategies. A method used by many is to focus on neighborhoods. It is thought by using crime specific strategies and focusing on quality of life issues, the police can reduce crime (TELEMASP, 1998).

The premise that there is an ongoing need for on duty shift or watch commanders indicates that agencies must continue to consider where the geographic decentralization of command responsibility should fall within their command structure. If the creation of district command positions still necessitates watch commanders or the appointment of

first line supervisors to assume acting shift commander duties then logically the geographic decentralization of command should occur, if at all, at a higher level within the agencies command structure. Raynor and Bower (2001) view the decentralization and devolution movement of the 1990s as so strong that it has become the conventional wisdom. They recommend a strategy of managing divisions dynamically while still “leading from the center” (Maguire, 2003).

An irony of the geographic decentralization organizational structure is that by unifying the command of officers and first line supervisors working a specific geographic area under the command of a single person a complex command structure is created. First line supervisors seeking guidance from their district commanders often must wait days before receiving any feedback they request and likewise commanders requesting information from first line supervisors will frequently not receive the needed response for an unreasonable period of time. It is generally thought that higher levels of complexity within an organization lead to greater needs for control. The confirmatory factor analysis of structural complexity empirically supports Maguire’s (1997a) contention that complexity is not unidimensional and should not be treated as such. Although locating decision-making authority for the majority of issues in higher levels of the command structure helps to maintain control, it is difficult to implement from a practical standpoint when the organization is complex (Wilson 2003).

Empowered district commanders can guide the first line supervisors they oversee to carry out tasks or attempt to address issues occurring in their district during that supervisors assigned work shift. However, the fluid nature of law enforcement agencies daily operations frequently precludes the execution of the directives given by district

commanders. A district commander cannot effectively oversee the one hundred and sixty eight hours of field operations for which they are responsible on a weekly basis. If future integration is to remain a possibility, the corporate office must impose strategic constraints, lest complete independence lead to the pursuit of division-level strategies that undermine possible future synergies (Raynor & Bower, 2001).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The heart of community policing lies in the very roots of modern civilization. Town criers watched for problems and summoned to their aid the community resources needed to address that problem. Early police organizations were structured to effectively divide and coordinate the work to be done in responding to community problems. The cry for geographic decentralization may not be a call to arms for a policing rebellion but it is a subtle indictment of almost two hundred years of police procedure that was based in its inception not on tradition but rather on the effective model of military leadership. While the militarization of policing may seem antithetical to the “quiet revolution” known as community-oriented policing or problem oriented policing (Kelling, 1988), one must bear in mind that a fundamental element inherent in crime control ideology is a strong component of military pro-activity. The contemporary political trend reflects the notion that ideology guides politics, politics guide policy, and policy funds police activities (Falcone, 2002).

The primary resource of any organization is the people of whom the organization consists and to facilitate their most effective productivity leadership must have an adequate presence. While it is trendy, faddish and appealing to the popular culture to have high-tech equipment (as it stands as a reflection of organizational

professionalization) sophisticated equipment is no match for what people committed to a community can accomplish when working together (Falcone, 2002). Electronic communications from district commanders do not instill confidence in police officers or provide adequate support for first line supervisors. In both the private and public sectors coordination of work requires an intuitive knowledge of the operations being conducted. Any framework for thinking about corporate strategy is built on an understanding of how divisions interact with one another and how they interact with the corporate office. If divisions share valuable resources or capabilities, we take it as evidence of a strategy of related diversification. In such cases, the relationship between headquarters and divisions is structured to facilitate interdivisional cooperation (Raynor & Bower, 2001).

Organizational structures based on the division of labor, such as those operating through geographic decentralization, are primarily concerned with operational efficiency. Organizational structures focused on the coordination of work, as well as core community-policing concepts, are primarily concerned with operational effectiveness. Changes in the formal structure of police organizations constitute only one part of the community policing movement. For some commentators, structural changes are the most important part of community policing, while for others such changes represent mere tinkering (Maguire, 2003).

By placing the bulk of operational responsibility on first line supervisors geographic decentralization has the effect of delayerizing agencies rank structure. Police executives should not blindly delayerize their rank structure. There is scant evidence that short rank structures are better. Police executives who wish to delayerize their departments should first identify what exactly they hope to accomplish by such



delayerizing and should consider alternatives. For example, community policing and problem solving by line officers is probably better achieved by pushing discretion “down” to the line staff (that is, by decentralizing decision making) instead of delayerizing rank structure (King, 2003).

“Delayerization” by geographic decentralization, whether intentional or inadvertent, creates a cross cutting cleavage regarding core community policing values. “Delayerizing” command ranks may not be the panacea some hope it is. The critics of police rank structure have been numerous and vocal. Chanting the mantra that police organizations should delayerize does not make it the proper thing to do. The time is ripe to test these assertions and fully explore the hierarchical nature of police organizations. Until we learn more about the authority hierarchy in police organizations, we should be careful about trying to bend the granite of rank structure (King, 2003).

The private sector provides an interesting corollary. Especially in large, complex, diversified companies, the prescription is “more decentralization”- at the limit, an almost complete devolution of decision of decision-making authority to the operating divisions and those people closest to emerging technologies, competitors, and customers. This point of view has been espoused so often and with such conviction that one might even refer to it as the conventional wisdom. Like most conventional wisdom, however, this approach does not always serve us well. We have found that responding effectively in uncertain markets often requires more- not less- direction from the center (Raynor & Bower, 2001).

Effective application of community policing philosophy to real time operations requires clear and present leadership not unreasonably complex and covert oversight.

According to Daft (2001), the organizational hierarchy is a linkage that coordinates the top and bottom of an organization. Therefore, while hierarchical differentiation adds complexity to an organization, it may also help to coordinate tasks (Wilson, 2003). The determination by many agencies to develop or maintain watch command structures serves as evidence supporting this argument.

Geographic decentralization creates complex command structures primarily because communication between first line supervisors and commanders are frequently inefficient and ineffective. Langworthy (1986) and Maguire (1997a) used the number of day beats, night beats, and precinct stations to indicate spatial differentiation. These types of factor analytic measurement techniques represent a significant advancement in the study of police organizations. Maguire (1997a) advised that differentiation among the various dimensions reduces centralizations because relegating decisions to higher levels of the organization when the structure is complex is very inefficient. Organizations that are more complex reduce centralization but enhance coordination and control through formalization and administration. Based on data pertaining to the 432 largest, municipal police organizations he found no support for a relationship between structural complexity and control (Wilson, 2003).

Formalization and administration fail when operations are fluid and demand real time responses. These competing influences may explain why there is not a statistically significant relationship between spatial differentiation and structural control (Wilson, 2003). It seems that police organizations that are more differentiated geographically would require greater coordination efforts. On the other hand, it is also proposed that “organic” organizations are generally more informal and adaptive (Burns and Stalker,

1961). In sum, we cannot clearly conclude from prior research how rank structure affects organizations. It appears, however, that rank structure is not the bogeyman it has been made out to be (King, 2003).

A final analysis of geographic decentralization must emphasize a few key components. Centralization is concerned with the dispersion of authority to make decisions within the organization, not geographic dispersion (Maguire, 2003). A review of these contentions finds little reason to believe that tall rank structures are either beneficial or detrimental (King, 2003). Developing effective responses to problems does not mandate a community be divided geographically so data can be grouped together to identify problems but rather the problems within a community may be more aptly identified when data is grouped within a specific time frame.

The effective management of resources requires a real time response based on recent data that has been analyzed and then balanced with the immediate requirements of patrol operations. The premise that problem-solving initiatives are a tool and not the sole aspect of modern police service should be remembered. The negative impact on a citizen victimized by crime must not be unduly compounded by an organizations operational scheme. The needs of citizens calling for service in one geographic district should not have less value than a problem solving initiative taking place in another district at the same time.

The presence of watch commanders would facilitate the balancing of the real time problem solving needs with operational responsibilities. Command personnel have the understanding and authority needed to achieve this type of balance. Commanders can effectively manage the resources available during a specific period of time utilizing the

best information available while considering the current need for response. Communities should be viewed, as whole bodies with varying needs at different times of day.

Traditional command structures based on operational shifts rather than districts via geographic decentralization allow continuity of operations while still providing a flexible framework to lead from the center as in successful corporations. The use of strategic constraints should not be confused with routine intervention by a corporate office. To create strategic flexibility, divisions must still enjoy considerable operational autonomy and remain competitive as stand-alone businesses. The companies that will benefit most from a dynamic approach to corporate strategy are those operating in highly uncertain competitive environments in which, despite the uncertainty, the needs to make significant portfolio-level investments remains. But many well-managed and respected diversified corporations will continue to conform to traditional approaches for the simple reason that they remain entirely appropriate (Raynor & Bower, 2001).

Advocates of geographic decentralization have discovered opposition by policing academics and practitioners who have given the concept a thorough analysis over the last decade. Future criticisms of police rank structure should be more circumspect about the reality of police rank structure. It is important to note that advocates of police bureaucratization, such as O.W. Wilson, did not contend that police agencies should have tall rank structures. Rather, police agencies were advised to create rank structures and spans of controls appropriate for the task at hand (King, 2003).

The Waco Police department has only four command ranks as compared to other large municipal police agencies in the United States, which have mean and median of six command ranks. If problem oriented community policing is to ultimately succeed in

Waco an additional tier in the police departments rank structure should be added. The addition of one rank would allow a return to a traditional watch command structure while assigning geographic responsibility, the task at hand, to the new higher-ranking position. Perhaps the most apt summation regarding the continuing evolution of community policing was made by Maguire (2003) when he wrote, "Much more remains to be done".

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