Community Policing Helps Townships Tackle Crime

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Community policing initiatives have been tested under many names for over 30 years, evolving from early attempts to counteract the isolation of police officers from the general public by returning them to foot patrol. Those experiments developed into extensive neighborhood and community-wide outreach and partnership programs, with federal, state and private funding, that seek to improve the quality of life.

Criticized by some as simply social work, community policing programs are now challenging law enforcement agencies to restructure and rethink their own mission. To integrate community policing into their crime prevention and control programs, law enforcement agencies are empowering field officers with greater decision making authority and utilizing computerized crime data and problem solving techniques to aggressively target specific types of crime. As a result, local officials are called upon to assist community policing efforts by supporting departmental change, participating in community partnerships, and providing staff, equipment and funding.

Because it works best when it is tailored to a community's specific needs, community policing takes many forms, and it is well-suited to the township form of government. The following articles illustrate some of the ways Michigan townships are putting officers back on the streets, and back into the community.

What is community policing?

One of the major differences between traditional crime control and community policing is how a law enforcement agency and a community define success. Instead of counting the number of arrests, community policing looks at the quality of life in a neighborhood. Specifically, community policing attempts to reduce the fear of crime and enable residents to feel safe in their homes and businesses.

In practice, this means making an area a better place to live, where neighbors know and look out for each other and specific problems are solved with everyone's input and cooperation. Much of this is accomplished through social services and resident action, but "the police must be part of the solution, since they are the only public servants who options range all the way from patting a youngster on the back for a job well done to the use of deadly force."

Establishing a presence on the street

One of the most recognizable elements of community policing is the presence of community officers in an area. Moving police officers out of vehicles and onto the street to "walk the beat," is the first step in establishing a community policing program. Officers get to know and gain the trust of the individuals who live in their area. Residents know how to contact them and where to find them; they learn that police will respond to their concerns.

"We still have a number of law enforcement officers responding to calls for service," reports Grand Haven Charter Township Superintendent Bill Cargo (Ottawa County). "But with three community officers from the
sheriff's department hired with a federal Universal Hiring Program grant, we're emphasizing getting those officers into the community instead."

"We don't have a separate community policing division in the department," says Meridian Charter Township Police Chief Gary Gibbons (Ingham County). "We try to spread the effort across the department, and our goal is to involve every officer. Each officer is assigned a neighborhood and is responsible for maintaining contact with the residents. The officer attends neighborhood meetings to provide assistance and build trust and contacts with residents over time."

A crucial element to establish a police presence in a neighborhood is empowering an officer to make decisions about his or her activities. "We have assigned each officer to a specific area within the township that they are responsible for," reports Gerrish Township Police Dept. Chief John Biggar (Roscommon County). "We have given our officers the authority to manage their own area with the assurance that they along, with the citizens are going to be the decision makers. Our township board enthusiastically supports this new direction and, in fact, participated in the process completely."

One benefit to this approach is that many officers find the increased authority and challenges enhance their work experience. In Kalamazoo Charter Township (Kalamazoo County), community police officers (CPOs) are each assigned a five- or six block area identified as a high area for service calls. CPOs work directly with community associations, housing managers, business owners and schools. "Community policing is not really complicated; it's solving problems," says CPO Dale DeYoung, who has several years of traditional police experience. "It's a lot more work than traditional police work, but it's the most rewarding thing I've ever done."

Officers learn quickly that resident concerns are often seemingly insignificant or non-criminal complaints, such as dogs barking or neighbor disputes. But the residents learn that the police will come and participate in a solution. "Sometimes people are afraid to call us for fear of bothering us," says Kay Hoffman, chief of Lansing Charter Township Police Department (Ingham County). "One elderly lady said she didn't want people to think she was being a nosy neighbor when we were called for a car alarm at 2 a.m. I told her, 'You're not being a nosy neighbor, you're being a good neighbor.' People are more willing to call us now.

A resident association or neighborhood watch is one of the first programs a CPO establishes, recognizing that crime are solved primarily through information from the people who live in the area. In 1998, the Gerrish Township Police Department and the township board met with a citizens group to begin to develop community partnerships. Gerrish Township is a northern Michigan vacation community, and many residents only occupy their homes in the summer, depending on year-round residents and the police to monitor their properties. As a result, the Advisory Community Team - Neighbors on Watch (ACT NOW) was formed to organize Neighborhood Watches and conduct monthly meetings. Grant funds were used to purchase printed material, postage and Neighborhood Watch signs. Seven new neighborhood groups were formed and a membership list of over 100 people was developed. Recent programs included presentations by Lansing Police Department community officers on starting a watch program and making homes less attractive to thieves.

After initiating a community policing program, crime statistics typically increase in the first year or two. Then they typically drop to below the crime statistics before the program began. The initial jump is attributed to increased resident reports of crimes. As the program targets the residents' concerns, crimes decrease.

Meridian Charter Township (Ingham County) Manager Jerry Richards believes that without the interaction of the residents and the township's police officers, "We'd see more police issues dealt with at public meetings with elected officials. Because the officers have high visibility and voice mail, they are easier to reach. As a result, people aren't coming to board meetings to complain about police services or to ask what's being done about various things, because they already know from their community police officers."
Offering customer-based problem solving

Community policing takes customer-based approach to identifying its objectives. Officers work with neighborhood groups, business owners, housing managers, and local zoning or building code enforcement officers to identify those problems that contribute most to fear and disorder in an area. Then the officers develop specific strategies to solve those problems, such as towing junk cars, aggressively enforcing building or zoning violation, working with landlords to clean up housing units or imposing curfews on teenagers to prevent loitering at local businesses.

While the police may believe residents want them to concentrate on violent crimes such as homicide, robbery or car thefts, citizens typically identify "nuisance" problems as their primary concerns. "We sometimes assume we know what people need, and we're off-base. It's easy for me to drive through a neighborhood and think, 'Well, this is a nice neighborhood; they don't have any needs.'" says Hoffman. "But maybe residents have noticed there's a junk car that's been parked somewhere for two weeks and they want it gone." Hoffman says that blight is often the first step in an area’s decay into a high-crime area, and residents are usually more sensitive than the police to changes in the neighborhood.

"If a place looks awful, the attitude of the residents is often the same," says Emmett Charter Township Supervisor Jim Demarest (Calhoun County). "Our public safety officers are in partnership with our code compliance department." Officers are often the first to hear about zoning violations, blight or noxious weeds, and they can refer citizens to the compliance department or a 24-hour complaint hotline. They also follow up on code complaints.

If housing is inhabited by drug dealers, the officers can work with the landlords and other residents to identify the dealers and make arrests and eviction. In Lansing, one community officer attended apartment showings as a signal to potential drug dealing residents to look elsewhere.

Working with vulnerable populations

One of the most important elements of community policing is the effort to protect those members of a neighborhood who are most at risk of being victimized, such as senior citizens, children, and victims of domestic abuse, or at risk of becoming involved in criminal activity, such as disenfranchised teens.

By working with domestic abuse hotlines and shelters, officers can ensure that more domestic violence incidents are reported and responded to. The Lapeer County Sheriff's Department established a Domestic Abuse Coalition with hospital emergency room personnel; a citizen's group against domestic violence; probate, district and circuit court workers; and 17 other agencies in the county. The coalition increased and mandated training to professionals, established protocols for identifying, treating and properly referring victims, established an advocated system for victims, made arrests mandatory, and required convicted abusers to participate in an awareness program.

CPOs can organize programs where teens work together to clean up seniors' yards or paint their houses - improvising the neighborhood, assisting the elderly and enabling seniors and teens to get to know each other, reducing the potential for those teens to victimize someone they now consider their neighbor. Programs for children and teens are some of the most visible aspects of community policing, and they are often ones the officers are most enthusiastic about.

Meridian Charter Township Public Safety Officer Gaylord Mankowski initiated a Spartan Buddies program similar to Big Brothers/Big Sisters that pairs MSU student volunteers with East Lansing elementary school children from single parent homes. Mankowski visits the schools as the township's K-9 officer. "It's a daily thing for me. I try to stop in as part of my patrol duties to check up on the kids. Or, if a kid gets into trouble,
they can page me and I'll go in and see what I can do. I also help arrange a different monthly activity for the kids and their Spartan buddies."

The Marquette County Sheriff's Office conducts an annual West End Bicycle Rodeo that in 1999 included over 250 children. The rodeo has grown in three years from the initial request of one township police department for help registering bikes. The township, school district, Neighborhood Watch, State Police, Sheriff's Department, State Farm Insurance, a local radio station and local businesses have co-sponsored or contributed funds, space, food and gifts to the event. Children register their bikes, are given safety helmets, practice safe bike riding in the rodeo and enjoy food and prizes.

Emmett Charter Township has a school liaison officer with an office inside the high school who works at the combined high school and middle school campus every day. Dressed in a polo shirt and pants, with a badge and a weapon, he gives students a positive exposure to law enforcement, making them more comfortable approaching him if there are problems.

In Grand Haven Charter Township, there were problems with students parking in an exclusive residential district near the high school. Officers worked with the residents and students, and the problem has been virtually eliminated. According to Township Superintendent Cargo, "There's positive reinforcement, too. The local movie theater has cooperated with the effort and given officers free passes, which they can give to kids who've been helpful." As a result, kids are more willing to talk to officers. When vandalism was caught on videotape, local kids helped identify the culprits. The officers worked with the parent, and voluntary restitution is being made instead of sending the case to juvenile court.

**Developing community partnerships**

Today's community policing evolved as community police officers made themselves part of their assigned neighborhood and became concerned about the residents' daily lives. The officers initiated new and non-traditional programs because they were frustrated by social problems that contributed to crimes, but were beyond the normal jurisdiction of police work. They formed partnerships with residents, local organizations, social services agencies and businesses. They brought residents and local government officials together to target problems. They sought grants and donations to staff programs and obtain facilities. It's clear that community policing requires full cooperation between the police and the community.

Community partnerships take many innocent forms. In Kent and Ingham Counties, the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) has placed senior volunteer patrols with city police departments to patrol parks and streets, issue ordinance and parking violations and notify officers of problems. In Ypsilanti Charter Township (Washtenaw County), police bicycle patrols were funded in part by local donations.

Many early community policing programs utilized offices or facilities in the neighborhood, such as an office in a shopping mall, on a school campus or an empty house or apartment, to make the officers available to the area's residents. And, just as the police realized they needed to make "house calls", it became clear that many social service and community agencies also needed to be more accessible.

Kalamazoo County assigned a Neighborhood Assistant Prosecuting Attorney (NAPA) to work with the Neighborhood Liaison Officers in a heavily populated, high-crime neighborhood in Kalamazoo. The NAPA works daily with neighborhood association staff to organize activities, coordinate projects to clean graffiti and litter, meet with business owners, receive information from residents and respond to citizen inquiries.

Meridian Charter Township employs a human services coordinator who lines up assistance for people who can't pay their utilities or have other social services problems. Many of the coordinator's contacts come through the police department.
Citizens United to Track Truants (CUTT) was implemented in October 1997 as a partnership between the Lansing School District, the Lansing Police Department and RSVP. Volunteer senior citizens staff a telephone hotline at the police department's South Precinct Network Center to take calls from residents and businesses reporting suspected middle school truants. The volunteers get daily absentee reports from all Lansing middle schools, make calls to the students' parents and keep detailed records of the absences so the school district Department of Public Safety and police can visit the homes of students who are chronic truants. Other CUTT volunteers, using donated vehicles, patrol neighborhoods and commercial areas to call in suspected truants. After two years, juvenile crime during school hours dropped 27% and the number of students missing school more than 10 days a year dropped from 34% to 23%.

Assessing rural policing issues

Rural law enforcement issues may become the rule rather than the exception as more department adopt community policing. "In 1990 there were approximately 3,100 sheriffs' departments and 12,288 general-purpose local police departments among this country's 17,000 publicly funded state and local law enforcement agencies. Of these, 2,268 sheriffs' departments and 11,722 local police departments served areas with fewer than 50,000 residents. Thus, about 73% of sheriffs' departments and 95% of local police departments served rural populations. Well over half of all sheriffs' departments have fewer than 25 sworn personnel, while half of all local police departments have fewer than 10 sworn officers."

Community policing evolved in urban neighborhoods, but it is a valid approach in rural areas. In Michigan, both township police and county sheriff's departments are adapting community policing strategies to the unique challenges of rural areas.

"Townships are unique because of their geography," says Emmett Charter Township Supervisor Demarest. "We have 33.5 square miles to police and no clearly defined central downtown and no really compact residential areas. So we don't use the same community policing tactics in cities where you assign an officer to a specific geographical area. Instead, our effort has been to develop partnerships with neighborhood associations, the schools, the local Optimists Club - with all our community stakeholders."

In Chocolay Charter Township (Marquette County), the four full-time and two part-time township officers must cover 68 square miles. They respond to emergencies and major crimes, they are assisted by the sheriffs' department or State Police. "Marquette County is the largest county east of the Mississippi," says Chief Greg Zyburt. "If a residents calls the sheriff's department about a barking dog, it will take five or six hours for them to respond. We're just 15 minutes from any point in the township. We have 911 services, but at first people were hesitant to call for small things. We used to get five to 10 calls per day, but now that people know us, we get 70 to 80 calls per day."

The department received a grant for snowmobile enforcement after residents complained about reckless driving and speeding, and receives county and state funds for alcohol and seatbelt enforcement. The department deals a lot with kids and family matters, and alcohol abuse and domestic violence and among the common problems. The department has taken an aggressive approach to preventing underage drinking. "We got so we'd hear in the schools about a party in the woods, and we'd be out before they'd get there and take the beer kegs away," says Zyburt. "The kids were always taken to their parents. We don't see many of those keggers now."

Many urban and rural townships contract with the county sheriff's department for law enforcement, and many sheriff's departments are involved with community policing. In Grand Traverse County, the Sheriff's Office has implemented CPOs in 12 of the 13 townships, and they have developed problem-solving strategies tailored to their township's needs. In 1999, a group of volunteers removed more than six tons of debris, junk, garbage and 175 tires from state forest lands in Blair Township. The clean-up was organized by Blair Township Sheriff's
Deputy Scott Schwander, resident Dave Crosley, and volunteers including fire fighters, the sheriff's reserves and local residents. Area businesses and Blair Township provided food and supplies.

**Structural change within departments**

Community policing programs have been tried successfully - and unsuccessfully - in many parts of the United States. One of the toughest problems facing a new program is opposition from other officers within the department, who may view it as special treatment for the officers involved or a social service that does little to fight crime. Experience has shown that a new program does best when it is available to all sworn officers, community officers are permanently assigned to specific beats, and they are given great latitude and authority.

One example of changes prompted by community policing efforts is the increased use of bike patrols, which are general viewed positively by the public. In Meridian Charter Township, over a dozen officers are trained to make their rounds in car and on bike. "This helps us in our community policing efforts," said Detective Dale Hausermann, who added that residents appreciate seeing bike patrols in the township's parks. "Riding bikes makes them more accessible. They'll be face-to-face with people in their neighborhoods."

Grand Haven Charter Township has 20 miles of bike paths, and community officers patrol regularly. One community officer patrols a manufactured housing community on bike, and problems within the park have dropped dramatically.

However, other officers within a department may dismiss bike patrols as "vacation time", or may resent not being given the same opportunity.

"You need to have the staff embrace community policing," says Emmett Charter Township's Demarest. "You need to look realistically at how many people it will take. Without the COPS grants and other state funds, community policing would not have worked here. We've invested time and money to have the director of public safety become familiar with community policing techniques and grants. We continue to make the investment in our director and officers."

**New technology and crime mapping**

A community can put more sworn officers on the street it the department can accomplish the "civilian" tasks of paperwork and data input without them. New technology is not only making those tasks simpler, it is making them more productive and useful.

Using crime data and geographic information systems (GIS), maps can identify "hot spots" for specific types of crimes, right down to a specific street or corner. The key is to make the maps available to residents, neighborhood associations and local governments officials so they can provide information from their own experience in the neighborhood. Residents might point to a particular drug of gang house as the source of crimes clustered on a map.

Emmett Charter Township uses laptop computers in the field to collect data. Crime maps are provided to neighborhood watch groups and are available to the public via the township's web site.

The Lansing Police Department web site allows citizens easy access via e-mail to the problem-solving team assigned to their area. Residents can also report problems involving traffic, parking, drug activity, loud parties, animal complaines, juveniles or other concerns to the police department at www.lansingpolice.com.

**Coordinated crime control initiatives**
Referred to as "weed and seed" programs, new initiatives are being tested around the county that combine traditional crime control methods and community policing to prevent crime over time.

The weed and seed approach works like this: An area is identified through crime data and mapping as a source of drug dealing and gang activity. Drug dealers and violent gang members are arrested. Community police officers are assigned to the area, and they work with residents and other community groups to provide activities, mentoring and counseling for gang members and other youth-at-risk. Drug houses are condemned, and a neighborhood clean-up is organized. Landlords are required to bring housing up to code, and a playground and park are constructed on an empty lot. A neighborhood network center in a former elementary school offers a variety of afterschool programs, senior citizen meals, social services a medical clinic, computer training, and neighborhood dances. An active resident watch association reports abandoned cars and drug activity. More residents and children spend time outdoors getting to know one another and improving the appearance of their homes. Teens find more activities available, instead of hanging out a street corners or store parking lots. As an incentive to have them move into the neighborhood, the local municipality offers police officer no-interest, low-cost loans to purchase abandoned homes. The goal is to establish a positive environment in the neighborhood by the time the criminals are released from prison, reducing the potential for gang and drug activity to take root again.

The role of the township board

The township board can play an active role in defining the goals of community policing and supporting the organizational changes required to implement it.

"The thing we've done best in Grand Haven Charter Township is defined the expectations of the program and let the sheriff's department try to meet those expectations," says Cargo. "The township board shouldn't be involved in day-to-day operations. It should be able to clearly define goals and objectives for law enforcement."

The township board must be an active partner in community policing efforts, and can be key participants in the problem solving process. Meridian Charter Township Manager Jerry Richards attended a community problem solving training session conducted for the township police department by the MSU's RCPI. "It brought in officers as well as administrators and clerical staff, so that everyone was up-to-speed on techniques." Chief Gary Gibbons adds, "In 1999, we partnered with the RCPI to meet each month and identify our needs. They helped us survey the department and provided training resources. It's been valuable."

The board can also assist by providing funding; investigating cooperative agreements with other municipalities, agencies and community organizations; distributing community information; and participating in community policing activities.

Does community policing work?

"Community policing has worked well in Meridian Charter Township," says Richards. "But it is work, and it is a change from traditional policing, I would encourage people to pursue it, but to have a plan. I'd steer them toward the professional assistance they can get at places like MSU, and to educate and train their police department."

According to the National Center for Community Policing, "In early experiments with foot patrols that spawned community policing, there was a tendency at first to focus on crime rates as the primary measure of success. In some communities, crime rates went down, while in others, the rates stayed the same or went up, yet people said that they felt safer. Were the people simply wrong? Or were these efforts having a positive impact that could not be captured by the crude yardstick of crimes reported to police?"
"Over time, it became apparent that the people were not wrong, they did feel safer, and they felt safer because community policing has a demonstrable and dramatic impact on reducing fear of crime. A closer look also confirmed that fear of crime can be as big a problem as crime itself, since it is what keeps people trapped inside their homes like prisoners, which robs the community of its spirit. Judged by that yardstick, community policing is a success."

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY RESOURCES

National Center for Community Policing
www.cj.msu.edu
The School of Criminal Justice, College of Social Science
Michigan State University
1407 S. Harrison Road, Nisbet Building, 3rd floor
East Lansing, MI 48823
(800) 892-9051 or (517) 355-9648

Dr. Robert Trojanowicz founded the National Center for Community Policing (NCCP) in the MSU School of Criminal Justice during the 1970s to assist police organizations operate in a manner that was responsible to the communities that they served. For nearly 30 years, NCCP has developed and documented pioneering research and surveys, produced numerous publications and reports, conducted training sessions, organized conferences, and supported pilot studies and programs such as the Neighborhood Network Center concept. NCCP provides training and technical assistance on a fee basis.

MSU's Regional Community Policing Institute
www.cj.msu.edu/~outreach/rcpi/
Michigan State University
1407 S. Harrison Road, Nisbet Building, 3rd floor
East Lansing, MI 48823
(800) 892-9051 or (517) 355-9648

In 1997, the COPS Office funded the creation of a network of Regional Community Policing Institutes (RCPI) to develop and deliver innovative community policing training to interested departments throughout a designated region. Institutes have the latitude to experiment with new ideas to challenge and improve traditional training curricula, and to develop curricula that support and sustain community policing. The institutes also provide a wide range of specialized training opportunities that are designed to ensure that community policing is a permanent part of law enforcement.

The MSU RCPI specializes in facilitating organizational change within police agencies and the development of community partnerships to enhance community policing. Local partner agencies apply for partnership status by committing to the three principles of community policing: a customer-based organizational transformation, unlimited partnerships and a problem-solving strategy based on data. Partner agencies receive technical assistance and training, usually provided free to the department through the RCPI's COPS grant funding.
Applications for the 2001 partner selection process are available at www.cj.msu.edu, or by calling (800) 892-9051.