The Basics of Community Policing
by Robert Trojanowicz and Bonnie Bucqueroux

Editor's Note: This article, published in the Christian Science Monitor on June 18, 1992, is being reprinted here as a service to readers who may want to use it to explain the basics of Community Policing to others inside and outside of policing. While readers of this newsletter are experts in the field, this is offered as a useful wrap-up of what Community Policing is, how it works, and what we see for the future.

The ugly chain of events that began with the brutal beating of Rodney King confirms the urgent need for Community Policing reform. While Community Policing is no panacea, it promotes mutual trust and cooperation between people and police, at the same time it helps to empower neighborhoods in danger of being overwhelmed by crime, drugs, and the poisonous mix of apathy, despair, and unrest.

Los Angeles thrust Community Policing into the spotlight, yet many people still do not know exactly what it is and what it can do. Many now know that there is a new breed of police officer who walks a beat, but true Community Policing reform does much more, reinventing the old-fashioned beat cop as today's Community Officer, who acts as a neighborhood organizer and problem solver, not just as a visible deterrent to crime. The Community Officer's mission is to involve average citizens in prioritizing their problems and in developing grass-roots initiatives to address them.

Problems can vary from gunfire to graffiti, from battered wives to barking dogs, from drugs to disorder. By stationing a Community Officer permanently in a manageable beat, the police can reach out to the law-abiding people imprisoned in their homes by fear, the people that other officers meet only as victims. By challenging people to work as partners in making their communities better and safer places, Community Policing produces a subtle but profound shift in the role and responsibility of the police. No longer are they the experts with all the answers, the "thin blue line" that protects the good people from the bad - "us" versus "them." Community Officers are part of the community, generalists who do whatever it takes to help people help themselves.

In New York, a Community Officer helped residents make sweeps of their drug-infested apartment building in Harlem, driving away the dealers and customers alike. In North Miami Beach, a Community Officer supervised young volunteers who painted the dilapidated homes of the elderly and infirmed, since areas in decline act as a
magnet for crime and drugs. In Lansing, Michigan, a Community Officer attends apartment showings, signalling potential predators to look elsewhere.

By encouraging Community Officers to act as the catalyst in confronting not only crime, but fear of crime and neighborhood decay and disorder, this decentralized and personalized form of policing breaks down the anonymity that plagues traditional police efforts. In a Community Policing beat, people know their officer by name, which means that they can hold the officer directly accountable if he or she does too little - or goes too far. The daily, face-to-face contact also allows the officer to learn whom to trust and whom to keep an eye on. And, as people start to take back their streets, those who would prey on them eventually find that they have no place to hide.

Crucial as well is that Community Policing allows officers to intervene with youngsters at risk, before they grow up to become the hardened, adult career criminals for whom we have no good answers. Traditional policing simply cannot provide motor patrol officers the time, the opportunity, and the continuity to do much about young shoplifters, muggers, and drug gang lookouts who quickly melt away into the crowd. Part of the answer might be for the Community Officer to work on providing kids with recreational activities or summer jobs. In Aurora, Colorado, an officer pairs youngsters with cadets from the Air Force Academy as mentors.

While Community Officers are full-fledged police officers, their performance is judged on how well they solve the problem, not on how many arrests they make and how quickly they answer the next call. Community Policing gives them the autonomy to tailor the response to local needs and resources, the chance to see whether the ideas work, and the opportunity to tinker or try again if they don’t.

Critics call this social work, not "real" police work, ridiculing community Officers as "lollicops" or the "grin-and-wave squad." Yet the police are the only public-service agency open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, that still makes house calls. And while many Community Officers risk early burnout trying to do too much, the best response is to decentralize and personalize other social services, using Community Policing as the model, so that Community Officers can return to spending more of their time doing what they do best.

Back when beat cops pounded the pavement, social workers, public health nurses, and probation and parole officers also made home visits, and "truant officers" scoured the streets looking for kids playing "hookey." So, in the same way that Community Policing updates the past, what we call the Neighborhood Network Center concept asks other service providers to join the Community Officer in an office in the beat, where they can work together as a new community-based team of problem solvers.

The Neighborhood Network Center that opened in Community Officer Don Christy's beat in Lansing recently applied the lessons of Community Policing to the delivery of other public and non-profit services. He serves as the protector and unofficial leader of the others who have followed his lead, and depending on the problem, he can seek help directly from the school psychologist, the social worker, student nurses, drug treatment counselors, other specialists, and a host of community and outside volunteers who work there.

Community Policing and Neighborhood Network Center reforms acknowledge that the police must be part of the solution, since they are the only public servants whose options range all the way from patting a youngster on the back for a job well done to the use of deadly force. At the same time, both approaches make it clear that the ultimate responsibility rests with the people trapped in troubled areas, who have the most to lose and the most to gain. The biggest challenge now is to persuade citizens fortunate enough to live in stable and secure neighborhoods to invest in and support such efforts in those dangerous areas that many have worked hard to escape. If any good comes from the violence in Los Angeles, perhaps it is the recognition that until we are all safe, no one is truly safe.
Robert Trojanowicz is director of the National Center for Community Policing at Michigan State University for which Bonnie Bucqueroux is associate director. Trojanowicz is also a research fellow in the Program in Criminal Justice Policy and Management at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government.