



## Community Policing: Would You Know It If You Saw It?

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## Introduction

This paper does not attempt to define community policing. Rather, it develops practical criteria which would allow one to walk into a city and say, "Yes, they are going in the direction in which good policing seems to be going."

Those to whom such an assessment is important might include a newly-elected mayor, a newly-appointed city manager, a newspaper or television journalist who has moved to a new city, and, perhaps most important, a citizen distressed by the current level of police responsiveness.

The name "community policing" was widely used in the late sixties and early seventies. In the minds of some, it carries the baggage of that period along with disappointments with the strategy as it was then practiced. Some are uncomfortable with the term, yet its use continues, apparently because it is based on values that people care about. Those values are captured in responses to the question, "What is the business of policing? What is policing about?" Community policing's answer is that the job of policing is to promote an interactive process through which the community and the police jointly address and solve problems.

## A Practical Exercise

The following story was created to illustrate, rather than define, the characteristics of community policing. Assume that the newly elected mayor of Harthaven, Connecticut, Bill Breetz, has attended a session for new mayors sponsored by the Institute of Politics at the Kennedy School of Government. During the five-day working session, Breetz heard several presentations on policing, and the terms "community policing" and "problem-oriented policing" were used, if not interchangeably, at least as terms that capture the best in contemporary American policing. Breetz had been elected on a reform slate which focused on Harthaven's fiscal problems, and his knowledge of policing was quite limited. He did know that the city's police department claimed to be responsive to the community. But was this "community policing," and how could he know what the predominant style of policing of the Harthaven department really was? After one of the presentations, he cornered the presenters, Chief Lee Brown of Houston and Darrel Stephens, head of the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF).

"Thanks for the provocative ideas," he said. "But when I go home, how will I know what Harthaven policing is really about?"

"Well, Mr. Mayor," Stephens replied, "Chief Brown has people on his force who have lots of experience with community policing. Maybe he'd send someone to Harthaven to look at your situation. I can free up Fred Gear from the PERF staff to visit at the same time. Fred really knows what's going on in policing these days."

The chief, nodding assent as Stephens was speaking, went off to make a phone call. He returned ten minutes later with the message that Robert Church, a Houston sergeant with fourteen years of experience on the street, would travel to Harthaven. Stephens promised that Gear would join Church in Harthaven.

Church, a large man in his mid-thirties with thinning sandy hair, arrived in Harthaven ten days later. After checking in at the Hilton, Church found that the mayor had left a message that unexpected city business would delay any meeting for at least a day. As he turned toward the lobby from the front desk, he saw Gear, a tall man with light brown hair, bearing down on him.

"We're on our own, Fred. The mayor can't meet with us today."

Ordinarily, they would have made a courtesy call on the local department and the chief, but Breetz had asked that they not do that until he had spoken with the chief. They decided to use the time to appraise the situation before meeting with the mayor.

It was a clear, sunny day, with temperatures in the low seventies. Church and Gear left the hotel and walked west up a gently rising hill. The street was called Asylum Avenue.

"Strange name," mused Church. "Wonder what it means." They moved in the direction of an overweight, pleasant-faced man selling hot dogs. His shiny aluminum cart was shaded by a large multi-colored umbrella that had begun to fade.

"Wanna frank, Buddy? Hot, not soggy, with sauerkraut..."

"Not right now, thanks. What can you tell us about this Asylum name?" asked Gear.

The man replied that early in the last century, an asylum for the deaf was built on the hill. The whole area was called, and referred to by its residents as, Asylum Hill.

"You wanna frank?" asked the hot dog man.

"No, no thanks. We want to talk to the police officers in that cruiser over there."

"Yes?" the hatless but neat-looking officer asked, after bringing the cruiser to a halt in response to a wave.

Church began, "Could you give us some information? We're from out of town, and..."

"I know you're not from Asylum Hill."

"How did you know that - my Texas accent?"

"Nope. I've been assigned here for almost two years, and pretty much know everyone who belongs. That's old Mrs. Jones over there. She's just coming back from depositing her pension check and picking up cash for the week. She doesn't feel the money's really hers unless she has it in her hand. She goes to the bank herself, so I keep an eye on her to make sure she gets home alright. Excuse me."

"Hey, Mrs. Jones, everything okay?"

"Except for my feet, Joe," the stooped elderly woman responded. "But I'm glad you're back. I didn't like going to the bank while you were on vacation. Doesn't feel as safe without you. Y'know, those kids hanging on the corner and all..."

She walked on, and Church commented, "Sounds like she thinks a lot of you."

"Yeah, and I like that. Not that I want to just hang around and be nice to old ladies. I still like to make collars. It gets my juices going. But it feels good to have people know me and appreciate what I do. Until I was assigned here pretty much on a permanent basis, it seemed like everybody in this city was a crook, deadbeat, or scumbag! That's all I saw or it was my job to look for. Now I've come to know lots of really decent people. And I listen to what's important to them."

"Bull!" said the officer's partner, a tall, mustached man who had gotten out of the passenger side and walked around the cruiser to stand with Church and Gear. "It's okay to be out here and talk nice to the people, and to have them like us, but we really don't have time to do some of these things. We're supposed to have meetings with the people in the neighborhood so we can go back and forth with them about what they see as the problems and what we can do to work with them. But the department doesn't help us find a place for the meetings. And I sure would like some help on how to handle a meeting or give a speech."

"Sometimes, I really feel 'hung out to dry' because I can't be sure that the area commander will come to the meeting. People will ask questions that I can't answer or that don't even seem related to the police. The other night, garbage pickup was the big issue. I have to figure it out on my own. The department says it wants us to do these things, but the structure is pretty much the same as it always was - in the way."

"But," the first interrupted, "you know you've always loved to figure out the answers. Now, they give us the leeway to be doing this stuff. We have the backing to do it our own way."

"Yeah, that's half right. But when are they going to realize that the department isn't organized to support what we're doing out here on the street? And what about promotions and assignments? Most still want to be a detective and a promotion is the only way to get a good pay raise."

"Yeah, that's true," admitted the first. "All I hope is that the union and the chief work that one out. I've heard that some departments have put in a parallel rank structure to recognize and reward guys who do what we do."

Church asked, "Are you evaluated by the number of arrests you make or citations you hand out?"

"No, not any more," replied the driver of the cruiser, squinting up at Church. "The chief says he would rather have us make the right arrest, or deal with a problem that really bugs the citizens. The numbers really don't seem to be what is emphasized any more, and the community hasn't objected."

"How does the department rate you then?"

"Well, we're not exactly sure, and neither are they. It's something we talk about a lot, and people mention 'quality of life,' but nobody knows how to do anything other than talk about it. The chief does seem to be trying to figure it out. But enough of this, why did you wave us down?"

"Just to ask some questions. Thanks for stopping."

The officers drove off, wondering what Church, obviously a police officer, and Gear, obviously not a police officer, were doing in the area.

"Probably some DEA undercover operation with time on their hands. Wish they'd tell us about these things," one said to the other.

Gear spoke to Church as they walked on.

"We learned some things to talk about with the mayor. Those officers have an understanding that they should be involved with the neighborhoods, but the department may not be organized to support them. The question for the mayor is whether the police department recognizes a neighborhood, not just by name, but organizationally. Are officers assigned to Asylum Hill, is there a structure of meetings with residents of Asylum Hill, and is this true of Harthaven's other neighborhoods? You know, it's pretty common for departments to make up their own patrol boundaries that cut across and ignore neighborhoods."

"And promotions and evaluations...They really concern officers. The department has to deal with them in the framework of new expectations. We also have to ask the mayor if he is willing to let the department put the old numbers game to rest. He'll be under real pressure from the media and some citizens if the reported crime numbers increase. Not being totally tied to UCR stats is important to community-oriented policing."

"Yeah, that's all part of it, but we should've asked something else," ventured Church.

"What's that?"

"We figured that they were patrolling in a certain way, that they weren't at the mercy of the dispatcher. For all we know, they were riding around waiting for a call, and their interest in Mrs. Jones was just because they're good cops. Given what we heard them say, we assumed that they were doing an essential part of community policing, problem solving."

"Yeah, you're right," admitted Gear. "One of the signs of community policing is that patrol officers are engaged in solving problems rather than in random cruising while waiting for a call from the dispatcher. Patrol officers operating under a community policing philosophy seek out the problems which seem to bother the community. They listen to people - directly, as citizens talk about problems, and indirectly, as they see patterns of incidents. Then, working with the community and other agencies, they try to solve the problems. That doesn't exclude them from the responsibility of answering calls, but the department has to support them through some sort of call management procedure."

Church, speaking from experience, went further. "You know, the mayor may want to implement community policing, but he may be nervous about the problem- solving part of it."

"Yeah," Fred replied. "It takes a courageous politician to encourage or even allow a police department to dig into issues which the police of thirty years ago wouldn't touch. Not within their sphere of professionalism, they would say. Let's see, the mayor is about 45 years old...Yep, he grew up in the late fifties and early sixties when cops were making some real advances, but a working partnership with the community wasn't part of the agenda."

"But if the mayor wants community policing, he'll have to bite the bullet, and let the police get into some problems that he won't have thought of as police issues."

"But they will be issues that the community wants dealt with," responded Gear, as they continued to walk. "Look to the south over there. Do you see that large white building with *HARTHAVEN INTELLIGENCER* written on the side? I saw it on the newsstand this morning. That's the major newspaper in town. Let's walk over there and talk to someone on the city desk."

"Okay," Church agreed. "They may have a sense of how decentralized the department really is. On the other hand, the reporters may not be savvy enough to understand what's happening if there is community policing."

Church continued, "Decentralization isn't easy for any department to deal with. Everyone's afraid of what might go wrong. But if community policing is for real, the guys with responsibility in the neighborhood have to be taking the lead around problems and calling in central as necessary, not the other way around."

"Yes," agreed Gear. "That's the way I've seen it in the good departments."

The receptionist at the *INTELLIGENCER* took their names and their request to speak with someone on the city desk about policing in Harthaven, and asked if they would have a seat while she contacted the city editor.

The editor sent Karen Goldthwaite, a reporter experienced with policing and other criminal justice issues, to speak with the two men.

Goldthwaite, a slender woman with quick movements, looked carefully at them, clearly seeking an angle and a story. She invited them into a private office, and after they had introduced themselves, asked why an out-of-town police officer and a PERF researcher were in Harthaven.

Gear, impressed that she knew about PERF, replied, "We're here privately and can't speak for the record. If it's a story you want, we can't give that to you. But we'd be happy to be helpful at some future date if we could pick your brain a bit now."

After some negotiating, Goldthwaite agreed to talk with them and to keep the conversation off the record.

"You seem to know a lot about the police here," said Church. "Do the Harthaven police care what the community is thinking about, what problems particularly bug citizens? Or is the department a buttoned-up fortress, saying they know best, and trying to keep the people at a distance?"

"No, no, you've targeted the very issue that the chief is trying to address, how to be the police department for *this* community," Goldthwaite replied. "But they don't pretend to have all the answers about how to talk with and listen to the community. They've tried several different methods. For example, the chief meets monthly with an advisory group of about 24 citizens. The members of the group set the agenda. They also ask the chief in advance for information and, if necessary, to have other members of the department present."

"Who chairs the meeting?" asked Fred.

"Interesting question. There is no chairperson of the advisory group, and the chief has resisted one being named. He wants it to be their meeting but doesn't want to be in the position of being on the spot, like a subpoenaed witness. He wants to be open, but he doesn't want the process to turn into a police commission that he reports to. What's happened is that the chief acts as a co-chair, and whichever citizen is interested in a particular issue is also co-chair. Not exactly Robert's Rules of Order, but it seems to have worked out comfortably, mostly because he's serious about hearing and working with them. He sees the problems which they raise as jointly owned, not just his. And they've had to learn this, too. It used to be easy to turn it over to the police and then complain because not much happened."

"Does anybody else come to the meetings?"

"The group asks some city administrators to come every now and then. For example, the superintendent of schools when they were talking about drugs."

She continued, "It's all been fairly quiet without much publicity. I'm interested in policing and have done a couple of stories. But only one of them made it into the paper, and that was buried on the inside pages. TV won't touch it at all. Not sexy enough."

"They're not the only meetings, are they?" Church asked.

"Well, I'm not sure. I have the impression that the chief wants the meetings replicated on the neighborhood level as part of the department's outreach, but that they haven't figured out just how to do it, or how to help the officers do it. My sister has dated the head of training, and a couple of times we've shared ideas over a pitcher of beer. His emphasis, both for recruits and in ongoing training, has been on the skills to think about problems and the way the community perceives problems. He and the chief don't want the usual response to incident after incident as if there weren't any pattern. After learning how to see the patterns and to define the problem, the

officers need to learn how to approach it, and who else they include in the discussion. These are big changes in the way that police think and operate, even I recognize that. It's frustrating for me not to be able to write about the whole changed approach in an exciting way."

Both Church and Gear were impressed with her grasp of the issues and asked who else they might talk with to get a sense of the Harthaven department and community policing.

"Well, you might want to talk to more patrol officers to get a sense of whether they regard the community as us versus them. The chief's values statement is pretty emphatic about the police function in partnership with the community. And you might want to talk to Chet Brodnicki. He's head of Asylum Hill Action. He's a tough activist, but not a nut. He's seen that it's to the neighborhood's advantage to have this kind of policing."

"Terrific reporter, she really understands the situation. I wish she covered Houston," Church remarked as they pushed through the swinging glass doors onto the wide sidewalk, squinting in the bright afternoon sunlight.

"Yeah," agreed Gear. "She knows how important it is for a department doing this kind of policing to have a mission statement and a clear statement about the values that guide the department, and..."

"Yeah, yeah," Church interrupted excitedly. "It used to sound like hogwash to me, until I realized that it really helped me decide what was important, and what wasn't. It let me work on my own more, because I knew what the department thought was important. Some guys thought it was meaningless, but now there's fewer of those guys as they realize that it works for them, too."

Church reached for his wallet, took out the Houston mission statement, and passed it to Gear, who read it aloud as they walked.

"THE MISSION OF THE HOUSTON POLICE DEPARTMENT IS TO  
ENHANCE THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN THE CITY OF HOUSTON  
BY WORKING COOPERATIVELY WITH THE PUBLIC AND WITHIN  
THE FRAMEWORK OF THE UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION  
TO ENFORCE THE LAWS, PRESERVE THE PEACE, REDUCE FEAR  
AND PROVIDE FOR A SAFE ENVIRONMENT.

"Mayor Breetz will certainly want to see the values and mission statements of the Harthaven department. The fact that the department has them is important. But he'll want to see if the department backs up the statements and the officers, even when they make mistakes. And he'll have to back the department as it works to have a partnership with the community. Lots of tough issues come out of that work," was Gear's reaction.

"Right," said Church. "I've been a cop for fourteen years, never sat behind a desk, and policing this way might keep me on after twenty. It can still be frustrating, but it's a different kind of frustration, not about the petty crap and regulations and not being able to do anything. At least when I feel like I'm against a stone wall now, it's because I'm up against a real problem. I feel good about what I do."

"Okay, now I want to find out if community and problem-oriented policing here is just a program involving a few officers, or just another community relations unit, a piece of the department," said Gear. "Seems to me that lots of departments have programs that they name 'community this or community that.' Real community policing has to involve the whole department. It's really a philosophy or approach of the whole department toward the community, not just another program."

After letting the mayor's office know where they could be reached, and twice asking for directions, they found Chet Brodnicki in a storefront with "Asylum Hill Action: AHA" painted on a large piece of cardboard leaning

on the inside of the front window. Brodnicki, about 5'10", neatly bearded and in jeans, looked up from his desk, without comment, at the two men in neckties and suits.

Church broke the silence. "We're from out of town, and are trying to learn about the way Harthaven is policed. Would you give us a little time?"

Brodnicki waved them to two battered folding chairs and a ten-minute conversation ensued in which Church and Gear were able to allay Brodnicki's suspicions. Brodnicki was frank.

"I like to beat up on the cops a bit. Crime is a good organizing issue, and talking about it helps get people to meetings. But it really isn't in the community's interest to fight the way the police are trying to operate now."

"Why's that?" asked Gear.

"Well, for one thing, it's to our advantage to have the community feel responsibility for its own problems and issues. We should step up to what has to be done rather than just finger-pointing and complaining. And the cops seem to be willing to work as partners, not like the old days when they listened only long enough to let us vent and run out of breath. Then they told us what the problem was. And patrol cars don't just get sent to the same problem places twice a week. Our cops know the area, and they'll sit down in the meetings and ask, 'What's going on at 67 Imlay St.?' So, I've lost them as whipping boys, but the issues that get raised by their problem solving drag in more city administrators than I could get by myself. And the community loves it; they feel like somebody's listening and trying to meet their needs."

"Is Asylum Hill the only place they do this?" asked Gear.

"No, they're trying to do it everywhere in the city, with the whole department. It works a little differently from area to area depending on the cops, the community, and the problems, but they're serious, it's not just talk," was the reply as Brodnicki's phone began to ring. "AHA," he answered, and then after a moment of silence, he said, "It's the mayor's office for you guys."

"Yeah, thanks," said Gear. "I let them know where we'd be."

After listening for a few minutes, and grunting assent, he handed the instrument back across the desk to Brodnicki.

"Thanks. If we're going to be helpful, we have to get right down to the mayor's office."

"Okay," Church said, as they hailed a cab. "What do we say to the mayor? Let's work up a list of questions and issues to begin the discussion."

And the following is what they wrote on the back of several envelopes during the cab ride to City Hall.

## **KEY ISSUES**

### **Mission Statement**

Does the department have an updated mission statement? Does it speak expressly of a partnership with the community? Is it actively promulgated among the officers and in the community?

### **Values**

Has the department worked to develop and promulgate a set of values about what is important to the



department? Do the values emphasize community involvement? Do the values include the importance of the officers? Are the values stressed as the guiding principles of the organization? Are they simple and straightforward? Is each officer familiar with them?

### **Decentralization**

What problems do neighborhood police handle? Is responsibility for response to a problem likely to remain in the area and with the area officers and go to central a necessary or vice versa?

### **Problem Solving**

Is the patrol function exercised in a random fashion or is it directed toward problem solving? In the course of most ordinary working days, are the officers cruising the streets in cars waiting for a call from dispatch, or are they spending the bulk of time addressing specific problems? Do the officers seek out problems? Do the officers attempt to determine the impact of their work?

### **Public Involvement**

Are there mechanisms which allow the community to identify problems? Are these mechanisms generally known to the community? Or must individual citizens and groups ask for special meetings? How is the community involved in policy making? There are wide variations possible, but meetings should be held with regularity and predictability. These should involve police decision makers, including the chief, rather than community relations specialists. Community representatives should include not only safe and conservative persons with a stake in the area, but those with whom the police are traditionally less comfortable. Over time, a sign of valid community involvement is that it is likely to have addressed issues of significance. Among these might be (not necessarily and not exclusively) hot pursuit, the use of force, and assignment of officers and supervisors. If one were to sit in on such meetings, they would be characterized by a sense of shared responsibility and a willingness on the part of the police to listen patiently in order to understand the problem as the community perceives it.

### **Attitude Toward Citizens**

If one sits in the communications room, what messages, both direct and indirect, are given to citizens calling the police? Is fast response time emphasized? Is a policy on response explained to callers in a non-abrasive fashion? Do officers disparage particular neighborhoods as being crime-ridden and not worth living in? Apart from ordinary daily cynicism, is there a sense of respect for the community being policed? Are most police waiting for "twenty and out"?

## **SUPPORTING ISSUES/CHARACTERISTICS**

### **Management Systems**

Does the department have management systems which support community policing? Given that the officer on the street has different responsibilities toward the community, does the management structure support those responsibilities? Have the roles of the first-line supervisors and managers from lieutenant on up to the chief changed? Have these roles been redefined to support the patrol and other functions interacting in partnership with the community around problem solving? Do mechanisms exist which promote communication between the patrol officers and the geographical area or are the officers on their own to figure that out? Does the structure of the organization help them to get to know the community or must the officers do this despite the organization? Do the officers feel that the organization encourages them to reach out for problem?

### **Performance Evaluation and Rewards**

Is the department attempting to judge performance on measures related to quality of life rather than by the numbers of arrests and/or citations? Is there an attempt to develop processes of reward, recognition, and perhaps promotion which value permanence of assignment, knowledge of a community, and problem solving? If

traditional rank structure is not helpful for community policing values, is the department attempting to address that issue?

### **Training**

What is the focus of training, both ongoing and for new recruits? Do the skills being imparted focus on problem solving, a sense of the way that the community experiences problems, how the city staffs various areas and functions, to what agencies the community and the police look for assistance in problem solving?

### **Beat Boundaries**

Does the department recognize, or is it in the process of working to recognize, existing neighborhoods? Are the departmental lines of responsibility consistent with areas of residence or commerce in the manner in which the citizens think about them? Or does the department superimpose its own boundaries and precincts without regard for the citizenry's sense of boundaries? Are officers assigned to geographical areas with such regularity that there is a relationship of mutual knowledge between the officer and persons who live, work, or regularly use the area? Do many of these persons know the officer(s) by name, and would the officer be missed if he or she did not appear for a few days?

### **Elected Officials**

Are the major elected officials familiar with what the police department is doing? Do they support it?

### **Program versus Philosophy**

Is the community policing philosophy restricted to only part of the department, a unit or a program, or is it department- and community-wide? If it is not community-wide, is movement in that direction? Does it include the chief on down? Are the responsibilities of meeting with the community, problem solving, and the like, perceived as the obligations of the whole department or only a special unit?

### **Media**

How do the newspapers treat police issues? Is response time portrayed as a major criterion of police quality? Is Uniform Crime Report (UCR) data utilized as the major criterion of police performance? Is quality of life a criterion for which the police have some responsibility? Would a review of news clippings convey a sense that the police believe that they share responsibility with the community?

### **The Perfect Community Policing Department**

...does not exist. No department is a paragon of the values represented by the concept community policing, nor is there one model of community policing. Departments will differ in the ways they address the issues cited. There are, for example, many different ways of effectively including the community in policy discussions. Yet, these issues, if discussed at all levels of a department, can help steer the department "in the direction in which good policing seems to be going."

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