Engaging the Community in Public Safety: Examples of Community Policing Concepts

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The issue of policing in the United States has once again emerged to the top of public discourse. As tragic image after tragic image fills our TV screens, tensions rise. The recent shootings by police and against police are creating a sense of distrust between the public and police or sew a narrative that our police are under attack. Unfortunately, during times of stress such as this, the tendency to editorialize the events and politicize the issues often leaves a bad taste in people’s mouths while mending none of the broken hearts or repairing the damaged fences. If you stay glued to the television, what solutions and actionable resources will you take away? The answer is likely, beyond an emotional response, very little. What, if anything, do situations like these tell us? As local government professionals, you know the reality: distrust is a real issue, but real work is being done by local governments and police departments to deepen and grow relationships with the communities they serve. One way this is being done is through the use of community-oriented policing, or at a minimum, engaging the community in some way, shape or form.

This article does not attempt to analyze the recent events in Dallas or Minnesota, New York or Baton Rouge: each incident, or incidents, have their own story, their own community, and their own set of complex issues and backstory that make up the pieces that create the picture of what happened. Nor does this article attempt to answer the political questions or unravel the cultural nuances. Nor does it make any prescriptive declarations that are guaranteed to work within your community and rid you of any of the ills. What this article aims to do instead is continue the dialog that many of you are having internally and highlight the great work many communities are doing to create strong relationships with their communities – what is working? While recent issues have fanned the flames of debate that has been brewing with intensity over the past few years, community trust, was talked about extensively at our BIG Ideas conference last year in Milwaukee, WI.

But what can be done? One of the long-standing concepts police departments have used and are using with increasing frequency is that of community policing. Community policing is defined by the Department of Justice as “a philosophy that promotes organizational strategies, which support the systematic use of partnerships and problem-solving techniques, to proactively address the immediate conditions that give rise to public safety issues such as crime, social disorder and fear of crime.”

According to a study conducted by a panel of professors and academics from across the world, COP was widely adopted, with over 85% of communities with a population over 100,000 having reported to implement it or be in the process of implementation. However, in the mid to late 2000s, adoption waned and utilization of the approach began to slip because some police departments indicated they did not know what specifically they should be engaging with the community about and began to doubt it’s transformative power. Furthermore, the report asserts that the lack of standardized guidelines muddled the approach, but as the idea of COP rests on a tailored approach to the community which the police department serves, a one size fits all approach with a rule book would not make sense. While not a rigorous study, even our own conversations at BIG last year reflect this sentiment. As the conversations around trust and polarization showed, each community has its own demographic with its own internal dialog. We
encourage you to read our report from BIG Ideas 2015, as it provides some great insight into the re-emerging issues around trust, polarization, and where we go from here.

Moreover, the study seems to suggest that at least some of the doubt about its transformative power can be traced to police departments changing perception from its original incarnation as a philosophy into a tool – the latter application often with the intent to use it for crime deterrence or treatment. As the researchers noted, the lack of homogeneity across COP programs made it difficult to measure the efficacy of it being used as a tool this way, which perhaps served as a primary discouraging factor (the researchers note that many police effectiveness measures are based on crime statistics, but this is not to say that it was ineffective in crime control, just that it is hard to come to a clear conclusion). Ultimately, though, such an application of COP fails to recognize the other benefits such a philosophy could have – the ones outlined in its main goals. Beyond that and because it is best viewed as a philosophy and not a tool in requires long-term, sustained commitment culturally within an organization.

Luckily, there are many examples of effective implementation of the community-oriented policing approach. In fact, many Alliance members have been recognized by various organizations for their efforts in community policing. Among them, in 2013, International Association for Chiefs of Police (IACP) awarded the City of Mankato their Community Policing Award for cities with a population 20,001-50,000. Because of their immigrant rich community and their engagement “mandate,” police officers have a distinct incentive to immerse themselves in their community. And they have even been recognized for doing so, beyond the accolades from associations, as this news story about a young Somali police officer who cultivated the trust and endearment of the children on his beat, embracing his obligation to get to know and even serve as a role model in the community. Of course, though, as the study mentioned earlier suggests and as the DOJ’s definition of COP alludes to, its success relies on so much more than just the police officers on before. This is where the culture of Mankato shines through. In 2014 they wrote about their “Tapestry Project” for our newsletter:

To better meet needs of the diverse population, the city of Mankato engaged in a multiple jurisdiction collaborative partnership. Included in this partnership are private, medical, non-profit, local government, faith-based organizations and Mankato resident volunteers, also known as “community connectors,” working together with the goal of simple acts of kindness across all cultures. Through these collaborative efforts, the “Tapestry Project” was created.

It is that type of organizational philosophy and planning that trickles down throughout the community and allows police to be both enforcers of the law and also “community connectors.”

Of course, community policing is not a concept that is restricted to communities in North America. Across Europe and even Asia, more and more countries and municipalities are using the concept to improve community relationships and strengthen their police force. With so many different approaches producing great results, it is not easy to find just one example to discuss. However, for the purpose of this article, we looked at a relatively new collaborative program among 5 EU cities called INSPEC2T or Inspiring Citizens Participation for Enhanced Community Policing Actions. While the project is still in its delivery phase and not near completion, some valuable information has resulted. And much like we noted in discussing COP in the US, INSPEC2T realizes the challenges in creating a centralized approach to community oriented policing because of the lack of homogeneity in how police are perceived and even carry out their duties across countries. They state in the project deliverable summary, “Community policing is spelt out differently in European countries. The idea or philosophy of CP is discussed in police organisations across the European Union, but the implementation displays major differences. Different traditions of police-community relations
have developed in these countries over a long time." They acknowledge that the challenges of community demographics, culture, and tradition can create barriers to a standardized community policing model, but another interesting thing to note is, like we discussed earlier in the article, they view community policing as a philosophy that requires cultural change, not just a tool, “Understanding [community policing] as an add-on or technical tool to broaden existing police strategies will fail to meet the ambitious objectives of this approach.”

What is interesting about INSPEC2T is that they are attempting to standardized components of community policing and pilot it across the 5 participating members, convening them through face-to-face workshops and through virtual meetings. The goals of this collaborative effort is to:

- Strengthen community policing:

  The INSPEC2T project will develop a creative and sustainable solution for community policing, built upon personal relationships and two-way communication, which takes into account social, cultural, ethical and legal dimensions.

- Engage and empower the community:

  The system will build trustworthy relationships between police departments and a motivated and skilled community through the delivery of a more personalized service, allowing citizens to collaborate in setting the police agenda.

- Communicate to collaborate:

  Accelerated communication and information sharing enables collaboration, resulting in early identification of risks and better crime intelligence.

- Increased awareness & prevention:

  The system will result in improved crime prevention thanks to increased awareness, early identification and timely intervention

Sound familiar? It will be interesting to follow this program as it moves forward and see what the impacts are for the 5 participating cities. Can they create a standardized approach? What will the end-result look like? We will follow-up on this as the project moves forward. Their progress can be followed at [http://inspec2t-project.eu](http://inspec2t-project.eu).

One other example we will look at briefly comes out of the city of Vancouver, British Columbia. They have adopted many of the “traditional” principals of community policing, and much like Mankato, MN, have a heavy focus on diversity and engaging immigrant (and in their case aboriginal) communities. But one thing that really helps to set Vancouver apart is that they have established 10 community policing centers which serve the purpose of helping engaging community members with other community members. How do they do this? Well, their community policing centers are staffed and run entirely by local citizens, not police. Bridging the gap between community and police is not an easy thing to do, so the Vancouver PD simply used community members to serve as a face and first point of contact for residents.

Finally, we would be remiss if we did not look at the work does by the Major Cities Chiefs Association and ICMA in looking at the future of policing. In August of last year, these two organizations held a summit on *Future Local Government, Police, and Community Relations*. The conversation, which convened experts and practitioners,
resulted in an interesting report that focuses on two of the six major pillars established by the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing the group thought could help guide conversations around effective, sustainable community policing. The two pillars their conversation revolved around, building trust & legitimacy and policy & oversight, of course, are supported by individual action items and concepts that help strengthen the pillars. While the report dives into detail and offers specific examples on successful implementation of the concepts and is an important read, even the list of tools is worthy in and of itself:

**Pillar One: Building Trust and Legitimacy**
- Acknowledging the Past and Moving Forward
- Community Conversations and Listening Tours
- Building the Foundations of Trust
- Hiring and Residency Requirements
- Law Enforcement Recruitment

**Pillar Two: Policy and Oversight**
- Reaching Your Constituents
- Respectful Treatment
- Supporting Law Enforcement
- Community Collaborations
- Speaking Up About Social Issues
- Role of Other Community Service Providers
- Civilian Oversight

While not an exhaustive summary of the event by any means, these pillars and “support beams” serve as a great introduction to approaches local government police departments can take to address the need to engage more deeply with the community. What is interesting about the examples above and the conversation as a whole from that event is the broad spectrum of needs. For example, as you can see, community policing and the future of policing is not simply rooted in a need to just hire more people or walk the beat and talk to people. Rather, change must occur across the entire department, and in many cases, across the entire local government organization. After all, the culture that community policing relies on can flourish so much more if the culture flows throughout the entire organization.

Clearly, the topic of community policing and peripheral issues are not easily implemented and the challenges not easily solved. And while we are constantly bombarded by images of death and inspired to be fearful, local police departments are doing incredible work. Of course there are significant issues of trust and polarization, magnified in certain communities more so than others. But the issues are not insurmountable. While the approaches to fixing the issues will not be homogenous, there are shared tenets that police departments can use and local governments as a whole can use to build greater connection within their communities.
About

The Alliance for Innovation has partnered with our state association in efforts to provide members of both organizations exposure to national innovations along with sharing innovative initiatives and projects.

The Alliance is a network of local governments driving innovation throughout their organizations. You can learn more about the Alliance for Innovation and or the joint Alliance and ICMA Knowledge Network at [www.transformgov.org](http://www.transformgov.org) or contact our Regional Director, Nijah Fudge at nfudge@transformgov.org.