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Community Caretakers: A Case Study in Changing the Culture of a Campus Police Department

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One of the greatest challenges facing law enforcement in the 21st century in the United States is earning and maintaining the trust of the communities it serves. At present, the narrative on community-police relations is often played out in the media. Unfortunately, the media tends to address community-police relations only after a high-profile, negative incident, such as an officer-involved shooting, and the relative lack of media coverage of positive community-police interactions serves only to fan the flames of any problems in community-police relationships.

Despite all of the negative media attention, a recent Gallup poll shows that U.S. residents' respect for police officers is at its highest level since 1967.¹ Serving in law enforcement is one of most challenging jobs in the

United States, and it is possible that the recent murders of officers in places like New York City, New York; Dallas, Texas; Baton Rouge, Louisiana; and Palm Springs, California, have reminded the public of the real and daily dangers of working in law enforcement. That said, the Gallup findings did vary somewhat by respondents' race, with Caucasians holding a higher level of respect for police (80 percent) than people of color (67 percent). Data from the Pew Research Center also revealed similar racial differences in opinions regarding officer-involved shootings, especially involving people of color; use-of-force incidents; and accountability for officer misconduct.² In sum, the research reveals some areas of promise with regard to community-police relations, along with some issues that continue to need attention.

The relationships between public safety agencies and the communities they serve can always be improved. In some places, great partnerships already exist between departments and communities, with only minor enhancements needed in neighborhoods that are already enjoying prosperity, peace, and goodwill. In other communities, however, the mistrust of local law enforcement is marked and seemingly beyond repair. These communities tend to be plagued by chronic violence and poverty; these challenges, along with limited resources and a perceived lack of safety for officers patrolling the communities they serve, can erode the morale of even the finest police and public safety personnel. The result is a general mistrust that exists between community members and the law enforcement agencies that serve and protect them.

Sources of Mistrust

Technological developments in society have contributed, at least in part, to some of the disconnect between law enforcement agencies and their communities. For example, as police agencies shifted from foot patrol to motorized patrol, officers lost regular face-to-face contact with community members. Motorized patrol was seen as more efficient, since it allowed

officers to respond more quickly to emergencies and patrol larger areas, which reduced costs to municipalities and was seen as a welcome change, especially during more challenging economic times. However, this change had the unintended consequence of shifting policing to a much more reactive (i.e., react and respond) than proactive approach.

As communities experienced growing unrest and more questions were raised about the quality of policing, departments turned to community policing. Community policing gained prominence in the 1970s and 1980s when many police departments began adopting this strategy.³ Community policing, as defined by the Department of Justice,

is a philosophy that promotes organizational strategies that 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.⁴

The community policing model is intended to return law enforcement to a proactive approach—one in which the law enforcement agencies and their officers enjoyed solid relationships with the people and communities they served.

Parallel to the widespread adoption of community policing was the perceived militarization of police departments. Many departments benefited from a federal program established in 1996 that delivered surplus military equipment to departments for little or no cost. In some communities, as their local law enforcement obtained more equipment, the perception was that the police were now equipping themselves to fight wars in their communities. Some people asked who the enemy was that their police were fighting that required providing officers with equipment used in war (e.g., armored personnel carriers). At the same time, police officers questioned if their communities were markedly dangerous given the need for military-grade equipment. The net effect was feelings of mistrust from both the police and the community that contributed to a growing divide between them.

It is important to note that the authors are not saying that law enforcement agencies should not acquire equipment needed to support their mission; rather, it is a reminder to consider the impact of the equipment's use on the community members and to use the equipment in ways that are understandable to the community. For example, using an armored carrier to approach a terrorism suspect is more understandable to community members than using this same equipment at a peaceful protest. The authors are also not suggesting that law enforcement leadership do anything to compromise officer safety. That said, leadership needs to recognize that a police response needs to be proportional to the event and that community perceptions of police "over-responding" may strain community-police relations.

Another issue facing some departments is that their personnel do not reflect the diversity of the communities they serve. There are a number of reasons for this, including disillusionment with policing as a profession, a lack of recruitment efforts targeting diverse candidates, and a lack of viable diverse candidates. While diversification of a police department can be difficult to achieve, it should remain a goal, and departments should strive to be representative of their communities.

Even as law enforcement agencies achieve greater diversity, however, this does not automatically mean that community-police relationships will improve. It is important that officers do not view their work as "us" (police) versus "them" (the community). It is also critical to understand that policing is challenging, and that even departments with a diverse officer corps can make mistakes. This is not an excuse—it is just the reality of giving any human the authority to use lethal force, make arrests for law violations, and maintain societal values. Officers, like all human beings, will inevitably make errors, particularly when complex decisions must be made in a matter of seconds, often under serious stress. Community members and the media that report on law enforcement matters must remember the humanity of officers; likewise, this humanity is a primary reason that having a proactive policing

philosophy is important. If the public perception of law enforcement officers is to be changed, then the community needs to know and experience those officers as human beings.

Weaknesses of Traditional Community Policing

As stated previously, law enforcement leaders looking for proactive ways to improve community-police relations increasingly adopted community policing strategies. This shift in strategic focus from the traditional reactive policing to a more proactive approach has been generally implemented in response to concerns about the lack of connectedness between departments and their communities. As dissatisfaction with law enforcement continues to be an issue in major cities, and, as civil unrest occasionally manifests as a result, it appears that community policing as a strategy has not achieved all of its goals. As noted in a recent IACP National Policy Summit on Community-Police Relations, “police departments have been challenged to fully reach the promise of community policing as it was intended for a number of reasons.”⁵

One major obstacle to effective community policing is that the strategy is often deployed as a program implemented by a small percentage of a department’s officer corps, as opposed to having a department-wide mission or philosophy on how officers should interact with the members of the community. Basically, proactive policing is often relegated to a small portion of officers—the community policing officers—rather than every officer focusing on community policing. Within the rank and file, those officers with community policing assignments are sometimes viewed as lesser officers compared to patrol officers, whose productivity and contributions are seen as greater.

From the department’s perspective, having a few “officer friendlies” is good for public relations, particularly in their community’s elementary and secondary schools. Positive interactions between officers and children in schools are often seen as the community policing path to better community-police

relationships in neighborhoods at large. Nevertheless, most community policing programs remain based on reactive enforcement philosophies. The end result of this partial implementation is some positive, light media coverage (e.g., photo opportunities), but little real change in terms of community-police relations.

Community Caretaking

The authors suggest an alternative to the community policing model known as “community caretaking.” Community caretaking is a philosophy that promotes organization-wide strategies emphasizing service, education, partnerships, and crime prevention and reduction with the goal of gaining greater community involvement to reduce crime through improved understanding of law enforcement practices. Service is the primary orientation of police engaged in community caretaking; however, officers will always have to provide enforcement of laws as part of their duties, no matter the philosophy of policing championed. On college campuses, for example, police and public safety departments need to provide a range of services, including security, safety, and enforcement. The focus, though, is on providing service to the community and taking care of its constituents—thus, “community caretaking.”

Citizens pay taxes to fund law enforcement and other municipal services to ensure that help will be there in case of an emergency and that the help will not only respond but, hopefully, resolve the problem. While many departments have mission statements that say “protect and serve,” the reality for some departments is that they tend to enforce and react. Departments seeking to be community caretakers need to engage the community regularly (e.g., meeting with leaders from the neighborhood who represent different stakeholders; hosting town hall meetings). It is also helpful to equip officers with the appropriate training, both in the academy and beyond, for success in these interactions. The community caretaking philosophy can lead community members to experience less fear of and greater trust in the police; they will

also become more active participants in their own security. For community caretaking departments to serve as models of excellence, they should pursue and obtain accreditation to ensure that their policies, procedures, and practices meet or exceed best practices.

Case Study: Princeton University Department of Public Safety

There are police departments that have already made the change to community caretaking. In 2010, Princeton University hired a new director of the Department of Public Safety (DPS) who was asked to change the focus of the department by enhancing an already strong campus law enforcement agency. The DPS consists of 150 full-time, part-time, and per diem professionally trained sworn and non-sworn personnel who ensure the safety of approximately 5,200 undergraduate students, 2,500 graduate students, and more than 6,000 faculty and staff. After an assessment of DPS, the director established a new department mission of community caretaking, emphasizing service and assistance over enforcement. The philosophy also means providing a safety net to every community member. Another step the director implemented as part of the community caretaking philosophy was to attain accreditation by the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA) in 2015.

Community caretaking requires buy-in from the entire department. As the department shifts its focus and makes the community aware of the change, community members will come to have different expectations of their interactions with members of the department. As noted above, the community caretaking approach differs from community policing in that it reflects a department-wide strategy and mission, rather than one program in a department with a small proportion of officers providing community policing. As a result, several major department-wide changes are necessary to move from a community policing paradigm to one of community caretaking. These changes need to be communicated from the top down on a consistent

and frequent basis.

The new mission and service philosophy must be communicated on a consistent basis both internally (within the department) and externally (to the community). Ideally, it will be highlighted as the department brand (e.g., “We Are Your Community Caretakers”; “Community Caring Is Our Mission”).

Policies and procedures need to meet or exceed national standards. For example, department accreditation is a statement to the community that the department leadership is committed to the best practices in law enforcement and to providing high-quality services. This is an important step in developing community trust in the department.

Changing the department culture requires giving officers permission to use their patrol time in different ways. At Princeton University, for example, a greater emphasis was placed on activities requiring officers to get out of their cars and do more foot patrols where they were encouraged to engage with the community. There was an emphasis placed on activities that would create opportunities for officers to engage with people in their patrol areas (e.g., the dorms, academic buildings, and sports centers).

To develop a program successfully, there must be assigned and dedicated oversight to facilitate the creation of new and different community connections. Princeton University DPS was fortunate since it had a community partnership initiative (CPI) already in place. To take the program to the next level, a sergeant was assigned part-time to develop and promote the existing CPI. Examples of community groups targeted for partnership included undergraduate dormitories, health services, athletic teams, graduate student dorms and dorm leaders, student organizations, and religious organizations. The goal was to get officers involved with the community by providing services and programming on a regular basis.

To help ensure the success of the department, hiring practices should

focus on developing local talent and increasing the diversity of the department. At Princeton University, for example, the DPS has a history of hiring a diverse body of staff and student workers. Hiring students in a university community is analogous to hiring local community members for a municipal police department.

Bringing members of the community into the department allows people to experience officers first-hand as good people who are indeed focused on service. Relatedly, it is important to educate the community about law enforcement, whether it is on a college campus or in a township or municipality. A citizen police academy is one good example of a strategy to educate the community about the field of law enforcement.

Leaders can encourage department members to develop their own community programs and then support the development and implementation of those programs. Once officers have ownership and autonomy regarding programming and experience the positive impact of their efforts, the mission of the department begins to become self-reinforcing. At Princeton DPS, for example, while some officers were excited about working with the community, it has taken six years to move to a fully officer-initiated program. Examples of recent successful programs include a three-on-three basketball tournament, cookie bake-off competitions, and coffee and conversation with cops.

Lessons Learned

The experience at Princeton DPS has yielded some valuable lessons about organizational change that may be helpful to police leadership, as well as ancillary roles like police support staff (e.g., administrative professionals) and police professional staff (e.g., police psychologists). Making meaningful and long-lasting institutional changes is a challenging process that requires buy-in from every stakeholder. It also requires the support of the different constituent groups that interact with the organization and its members.

Most important, community caretaking is an “all-in philosophy” with every member of the department engaged in the mission of the department every day. Other important lessons learned include the following:

- Law enforcement administration and leaders need to be mindful about consistently communicating about and promoting the community caretaking mission at every possible opportunity (e.g., department meetings, email correspondence, meetings with community groups).
- Law enforcement administration and leaders need to understand that it may take a long time for line officers and their sergeants to embrace this concept. At the Princeton DPS, for example, community caretaking was seen as just “words from the chief” until officers started to see results. This included more support for the DPS in terms of equipment and funding in line with the department mission. Moreover, active engagement with the community caretaking philosophy contributed to greater officer job satisfaction—officers who got involved with and made friends with people in the community through caretaking programs started to experience work more positively.
- Law enforcement administration and leaders should consider that some officers will not like to see the department make a change in philosophy. For example, some officers saw the community caretaking approach as doing less policing and more social work; others were passively resistant. Changing the culture takes a consistent message and time; at Princeton University, it took about five years to have the majority of the DPS accept the new mission and incorporate it into their day-to-day patrol activities. It was important to not create a split in the department between those who were interested in community caretaking and those who were not interested; rather, the approach was to let positive peer pressure work over time.
- Law enforcement administration and leaders should develop (or be very involved with the development of) programs related to the department’s mission, and then initially push these programs from the top down in the organization. The administration’s consistent tone and visible support for the programs will help with changing the culture of the department.
- Law enforcement administration and leaders should support the members of the department taking ownership for developing programs based on their own interests and expertise. For example, once the majority of the Princeton University’s DPS staff saw the benefit of the community caretaking approach, several officers started creating their own programs. Leaders can also reward officers for program development, which further reinforces the department’s mission and philosophy. In essence, almost everything that the administration does can be an opportunity to support (or not support) the efforts of its members to embody the mission of the

department.

- Law enforcement administration and leaders should recognize and understand that the mission can never be fully realized. While a majority of the department is involved in community programming at the Princeton DPS, more work remains to be done. For example, the department will need to make programs more strategic in terms of reaching out to different groups that may be outside of the officers' comfort zone.
- Law enforcement administration and leaders should communicate the mission of the department to all ancillary administrative and professional staff so that their work can be in sync with the culture of the department. For example, the department's police psychologist needs to understand the department's mission so that candidates vetted for potential hire are screened to assess their fit with the department's philosophy.
- Law enforcement administration and leaders can implement community caretaking without any special equipment, funding, or consultants. It might take time, but any officer and any department can do it.

Limitations

In this article, the authors discussed the DPS at Princeton University—a private university with generous resources and generally low crime. The authors acknowledge that some, perhaps many, would argue that the community caretaking approach would not work outside a campus environment or in a high crime area. In areas where crime is rampant, for example, it may be highly unlikely that the entire department would be able to actively engage in community caretaking, especially in places where specialized teams are needed (e.g., SWAT, vice, bomb squad). A community caretaking approach may also be more difficult to implement in larger agencies, and it stands to reason that the challenges associated with staying on mission grow with the size of an agency.

The media present another limitation of note. The mainstream media often highlight negative events involving police, and this one-sided approach only contributes to community-police mistrust. Many proactive departments now

have their own media officers whose job is to ensure that positive community-police interactions receive equal press as the more challenging situations that get extensive coverage, which at times can be incomplete or inaccurate.

It is important to also acknowledge that poverty and limited resources can be a barrier to the success of employing a community caretaking approach, and it is inappropriate and unfair to ask officers to solve every societal problem. Another challenge might be a highly resistant community—if a community does not want a relationship with the department, then employing the community caretaking approach is going to take a long time to develop until some amount of trust can be created between the department and the community it serves. When a department is facing a highly strained relationship with its community, then, perhaps, the community caretaking approach can be targeted to specific neighborhoods within the community at the outset with the hope that the approach could expand after some initial success.

The authors acknowledge that it might not be feasible for every department to fully realize a community caretaking mission, but even starting on this new path for law enforcement will benefit community-police relationships. The guiding principle of community caretaking is to emphasize service over enforcement; thus, the ultimate goal is to bring more balance to law enforcement's efforts within its communities. It is in this new, balanced approach that communities should start to see officers as more human, reasonable, and approachable, which, in turn, will lead to more community-police partnerships.

Conclusion

How does law enforcement shift its orientation to the new expectations of their communities? It starts with becoming community caretakers; it's a modest change that puts law enforcement on a new path to restore trust that may have been lost, as well as challenging officers and their departments in

new and more substantial ways. Departments that espouse a community caretaking approach can describe their mission to their communities. Public safety agencies serve as the ultimate safety net for every community, and it is police officers who are expected to assess situations and determine rapidly if a threat exists. In 21st century law enforcement, officers are asked to be a community resource for a greater number of non-enforcement situations. While officers should not be asked to solve every societal problem, modern-day officers can and should become stronger links between the community and other resources. In this way, community caretaking departments are part of the solution for community-police relations. Community caretaking is a foundational change; although, the work is hard and takes a long time, the results can truly be rewarding. ♦

Notes:

¹ Jeff Jones and Lydia Saad, "Gallup Poll Social Series: Crime," Gallup News Service, 2016, https://cdn.cnsnews.com/attachments/gallup-respect_for_police_survey.pdf.

² Rich Morin and Renee Stepler, *The Racial Confidence Gap in Police Performance* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2016), <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2016/09/29/the-racial-confidence-gap-in-police-performance>.

³ Gayle Fisher-Stewart, *Community Policing Explained: A Guide for Local Governments*, U.S. Department of Justice, Community Oriented Policing Services, 2007, https://cops.usdoj.gov/pdf/vets-to-cops/cp_explained.pdf.

⁴ *Community Policing Defined*, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2012, <https://ric-zai-inc.com/Publications/cops-p157-pub.pdf>.

⁵ *IACP National Policy Summit on Community-Police Relations: Advancing a Culture of Cohesion and Community Trust* (Alexandria, VA: International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2015), http://www.theiacp.org/Portals/0/documents/pdfs/CommunityPoliceRelationsSummitReport_web.pdf.

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