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What Happened to Community Policing?¹

Community policing had its origins in the mid-1980s. This is quite old as “new thinking” about the police goes these days. But it may be the only idea in American policing that has legs – community-oriented policing has taken off across the world, reshaping public service in many democracies.

What is not clear is where community policing is on the agenda today.

The first problem is that **cities started going bust** in the wake of the Great Recession. The routine operations of police departments and sheriffs are almost entirely locally funded. When house prices dropped and retail sales slid, so did municipal revenues. By 2010, from half to three-quarters of police departments (this depends on the study) reported their budgets had been sliced, usually in the 5-8% range. Laying off officers is hard. Freezing vacancies, finding “fat,” cutting programs, and refocusing staff priorities is less hard, so that is what many did.

Some argue that in a time of retrenchment policing must revert to its “core functions,” and that could include jettisoning community policing. Certainly it is not hard to find stories of cities that disbanded their community policing units or closed their storefront offices. But as the years go by, this is short-sighted. We know that how police relate to the general public affects crime-fighting effectiveness. The police need people to cooperate with them, follow directions in moments of crisis, report crimes promptly, and step forward as witnesses and bystanders when they have something to contribute. In 2014, how many homicides did not get solved because “no snitching” was the rule among those who knew and even loved the victim?

The federal government has tried to play some part in fixing this problem. The Community Oriented Policing Services Office awarded \$124 million to agencies across the country to hire or rehire officers for community policing posts. That's not much money, but finding and distributing even those dollars was very hard, and the program is only temporary.

A second factor implicated in declining attention to community policing was that **the innovation agenda space got pretty crowded**. In 1987 the alternative to community policing was the “professional” model of policing. It was under fire for encouraging aloofness and a “we-they”

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gap between the police and the public. by the mid-1990s there was a flood of new ideas. Through the end of the 20-aughts, the list of ideas seemingly competing for police attention has grown to encompass problem oriented policing, procedural justice policing, predictive policing, intelligence oriented policing, hot spots policing, and metrics-driven policing. Anti-terror policing was added to the list as well. Boxing local agencies into immigration enforcement also did not help, for it often runs afoul of the community policing agenda.

I sympathize with the chiefs trying to sort through these proposals, deciding what is good and what they can afford. A useful trick is that some of these agendas speak to particular parts of the department, and can be pursued without being in competition. For example, procedural justice policing focuses on improving encounters with the public, as victims or speeders. Training on better ways to handle these encounters is what the rank and file needs. By contrast, community policing emphasizes working with neighborhood organizations, churches, schools and resident activists. This importantly involves district commanders, liaison officers, and even representatives of other city agencies that can speak to public concerns. Agencies can do more than one thing at a time.

There is plenty of support for community policing, among both the general public and the agencies. It is still difficult to find a town that does not claim to be doing community policing; no chief wants to be without some program she can point to. In many communities the voters and taxpayers expect this to be so. When you read about cities that have reluctantly cut visible community policing units, they always claim they will continue to do community policing anyway, because it is their agency's regular way of doing business. If there is good news here, it is that public support and even some remaining organizational infrastructure for community policing can be found in many cities. It may be possible to breath new life into it in relatively short order, if there is the political will.

Support for community policing is still alive in the trenches as well. Recently a group of researchers who make up NIJ's National Police Research Platform surveyed officers in a national sample of 84 police and sheriffs' offices. Almost 16,000 officers responded. We asked them what their agencies real priorities were, based on the messages they themselves were getting from the top. A majority of officers in more than 70 percent of the agencies reported they were getting the message to stick with community policing. The same survey also found that they thought this was a good idea. Well over 70 percent of the officers surveyed endorsed community policing themselves. This was a reminder that, by now, most officers have grown up with it. Most places can at least hope that it is part of their regular way of doing business.

Legitimacy is one of the most important products of policing. A decade ago a report from the National Academy of Sciences Press reminded us this important fact. The report described vast improvements that have taken place in policing. Police are more effective in fighting crime; they are less corrupt; they are better equipped; they are less likely to unlawfully shoot people; they are vastly more professional and sophisticated about what they are doing. But none of this shows up in public opinion. Public ratings of the police have not improved in 30-plus years. In the Gallup Poll, high respect for the police has dropped since the late 1960s, and is currently down from

then by 17 percentage points. The racial gap in these figures remains as large as ever. Either the public has not noticed all of the positive changes identified by the Academy report, or there are other things that they think are important too. And what they think is important – another way to describe “the public” is “the voters and taxpayers.”

The events in Ferguson, Missouri and other places around the country are a reminder that the police need a legitimacy agenda too. Crime in this country dropped like a stone for two decades, but the drop has also not been enough to perk up public opinion. People also want their police to be responsive to the community problems that concern them, they want to know they can trust them to do the right thing, and they want reasonable treatment when their paths cross. 21st Century policing needs to speak to this agenda.