
Police/Citizen Partnerships in the Inner City



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In increasing numbers, today's police agencies turn to community-based approaches to solve complex organizational and social problems. Officer morale, public relations, community cohesion, and of course, reducing crime represent just a few of the many areas successfully addressed by contemporary community policing programs. But, regardless of the specific problem targeted by a particular community policing effort, each program owes its success to a common ingredient—the formation of a strong police/citizen partnership.

The process of closing longstanding gaps, either real or

perceptual, between the police and the public differs from community to community. In some communities, a simple friendly gesture by a police officer may be enough to get the partnership underway. However, within minority communities, where the chasm between police and citizens tends to be broad, special measures must be taken to bridge long, interpersonal distances before a true partnership begins.

In an effort to form a partnership between police and citizens, the Los Angeles, California, Police Department (LAPD) conducted an experiment in community-based policing. This article reports on the results of this experiment and provides sev-

eral insights regarding the formation of positive police/citizen partnerships within socially deprived minority neighborhoods.

OPERATION CUL-DE-SAC

Operation Cul-de-Sac (OCDS) began in February 1990. The focus of Operation Cul-de-Sac rested primarily on two goals. First, the LAPD implemented this program to examine the potential of community-based policing to restore order within the most crime-ridden, inner-city neighborhoods of Los Angeles. If successful, OCDS could serve as a model for future community-based policing programs targeting the violent crime and lack of com-

munity presence that characterize many inner-city neighborhoods.

Second, the department wanted to study the building processes for police/citizen partnerships. By identifying those initiatives that worked the best, the department could concentrate on the resources and actions that more readily facilitate the development of such partnerships.

Experiment Site: LA's Toughest Community

To test community-based policing under the most difficult of circumstances, the department selected one of the highest Part I¹ crime areas as the experiment site. LAPD officers know the area as "Newton Division RD 1345," a single patrol sector that covers approximately 1 square mile (10 square city blocks) within south central Los Angeles. This area plays host to numerous factors that present the ultimate challenge to contemporary policing methods.

First, a population density of some 5,000 residents occupying less than 500 dwellings characterizes Newton Division RD 1345. Most residents live in extreme poverty, with over one-half of all household incomes falling below the poverty line.

Other factors challenging community-based policing efforts in this area include high rates of mobility and ethnic transition. For example, in 1988, approximately 95% of the residents were African-American. Now, this figure rests at 40%, with the remainder being Hispanic First and second generation U.S. citizens. In addition, many



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living within the neighborhood entered this country illegally.

Historically, the neighborhoods of RD 1345 rank among the five most dangerous in the City of Los Angeles. The area continues to register staggering rates of street-level drug sales and drug-related offenses.

For example, in 1988, LAPD officers responded to reports of more than 150 assault and street robberies within the area's less than 1-square mile radius. Also in 1988, 34 drive-by shootings occurred in the area, the highest in any group of LA neighborhoods. In fact, residents of this patrol sector lived in such fear of gang activity that many resorted to boarding their doors and windows and painting their houses and cars in "gang-neutral" colors.

Treatment: Inner-City Community Policing

The first step taken to carry out the community-based policing plan of OCDS involved defining the

community to be served. Unfortunately, evidence of the traditional community markings, such as interpersonal experiences or identifiable physical barriers, did not exist in RD 1345. Thus, the police department experienced difficulty in identifying the residents of the particular "community," let alone their specific needs.

Therefore, in order to create a "community" wherein the police and residents could enjoy the benefits of community-based policing, the department placed physical barriers (in the form of iron gates) on the streets to mark the outer boundaries of the OCDS Program area. Of course, this was done only after the department received permission from residents through a series of local meetings and personal contacts by police.

After establishing community boundaries, which served as a necessary starting point to identify a "true" community, 60 LAPD officers worked voluntary overtime for



An officer introduces his K-9 search dog to children at a community function in the Operation Cul-de-Sac area.

2 weeks to patrol the OCDS project area on foot, bicycle, and horseback to increase positive interpersonal contacts with residents. These officers spent their time getting personally acquainted with the residents and the neighborhoods they served.

At the end of the 2-week initiation period, the department permanently assigned six officers to the area to maintain and continue to build community relations. This cadre of officers joined forces with community groups, including a high school within the project area, to sponsor community picnics, graffiti clean-ups, and neighborhood watch programs. In short, the police department took every opportunity it could to maximize informal, positive contacts with the citizens.

Within a short period time, the initiative started to pay off. Citizens who once lived in fear of leaving their homes started to communicate with each other and use the public areas, such as streets and parks, that gangs once controlled. Part I crimes in the OCDS area started to decrease and have remained 20% lower than

they were before the project began. And, the number of drive-by shootings dropped by more than 70%. OCDS showed that success in building a strong police/citizen partnership can be achieved, even in the most crime-ridden and impoverished neighborhoods.

Having established a strong community presence, the department wanted to determine the precise nature of this partnership and how it was built. To do so, it enlisted the assistance of academicians from California State University, Fullerton, who conducted a program analysis of OCDS. The results of this analysis shed light on the most effective types of police-citizen contacts on which to build a police/citizen partnership in the inner city.

POLICE/CITIZEN CONTACTS

In inner-city neighborhoods, such as the one targeted in Operation Cul-de-Sac, several obstacles stand in the way of creating strong police/citizen partnerships. On the one hand, extreme fear of becom-

ing victims of street violence causes most inner-city residents to ignore their crime prevention duties and to focus their efforts on sheer survival.

On the other hand, many inner-city residents fear or distrust the police. For example, in the OCDS neighborhoods, those residents who came from Central America display extreme fear of the police, which probably stems from their personal experiences with police corruption in their native countries.

OCDS Study

In order to determine how existing negative attitudes toward the police are best "unfrozen," and likewise, how positive attitudes are made stronger, researchers systematically studied the OCDS partnership process. To do this, they interviewed a random sample of 350 residents of the OCDS project area during the first and last month of the program's first year of operation.

The purpose of the study was to determine which aspects of police/citizen contacts have the greatest potential for improving working relationships between police and citizens. Researchers examined the type of contact (visual or physical), the frequency of contact (number of visual and face-to-face contacts between police and citizens), and location of contact (home, street, or both). They also looked at the quality of the contact, which took into consideration officer demeanor/politeness, officer helpfulness, officer understanding, and officer caring.

The researchers assessed the effects of the contact categories on community attitudes toward police/citizen partnerships by asking

OCDS residents to respond to the statement, "I will do anything possible to work with the police to make my neighborhood a better place to live." Responses were rated on a scale of 1 (agree strongly) to 5 (disagree strongly).

Findings: What Matters Most

By measuring the change in responses to this statement over the first year of OCDS, the study revealed that certain types of contact proved more effective than others in building police/citizen partnerships in inner-city neighborhoods.

Type of Contact

Residents who claimed only visual contact with OCDS officers improved their outlook toward police/citizen partnerships by approximately 12% over the 1-year study period. Residents who claimed to have at least one face-to-face contact with OCDS officers evidenced a 38% improvement in attitudes toward police/citizen partnerships.

Frequency of Contact

For those residents who only "saw" officers in their neighborhoods, frequency of contact did, nonetheless, condition their attitudes toward partnerships with the police. Those claiming to see an officer once daily improved their opinion by 33%, compared to 14% and 9% for those seeing an officer once per week or once per month, respectively.

The impact of face-to-face contact between citizens and police was nearly two times higher than that observed for visual contact only. Specifically, residents who made

daily personal contact with officers improved their relationship with police by a margin of 69%. By comparison, a weekly contact resulted in a 32% improvement, and a 19% improvement was realized if the resident made contact only once per month.

Location of Contact

Among those making personal contact with the police, contacts in the home improved partnership attitudes to a much larger extent (29%) than did contacts made in the streets (17%). However, those citizens who made contacts with police in both their homes and in the streets improved their attitudes by 34%.

44

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Quality of Contact

With regard to demeanor and politeness, residents responding "yes" to the statement, "Officers who patrol my neighborhood are generally polite to me," improved their partnership outlook by 37%. At the same time, when asked whether officer were "helpful in matters requiring their assistance," respondents who agreed with this statement evidenced a 35% improvement in partnership opinion.

Answering "yes" to the statement, "Officers generally take time to understand my particular problem," resulted in the second strongest opinion change discovered among OCDS residents, one of 72%. However, the greatest improvement in partnership opinion (80%) came about for those residents who believed that "officers cared about them as a person."

RECOMMENDATIONS

Several lessons in community-based policing can be drawn from the above analysis of Operation Cul-de-Sac. First and foremost, departments can use community-based policing as an effective tool to "unfreeze" perceptual gaps between police and citizens. As discovered here, this appears to be the case even in inner-city neighborhoods, where crime, lack of community presence, and deep-rooted anxieties toward police typically exist.

Even more important, favorable community interactions can and should be converted into a science. That is, all types of police/citizen interactions do not provide the same payoffs where change in community perception toward police activities is concerned. Simply put, some modes of community-based policing interactions seem to build citizen confidence more than others.

With respect to evidence presented here for inner-city neighborhoods, police agencies engaging in community-based policing efforts would be well advised to focus their efforts on the quality rather than quantity of police/citizen interactions. In other words, expressions of helpfulness and understanding

on the part of the officers toward citizens appear to be many times more important to the overall effectiveness of community policing programs than such factors as visual presence, frequency of contact, or even officer politeness and helpfulness.

In sum, police departments should structure job designs of officers assigned to build community partnerships in such a way as to maximize the potential for quality police/citizen contacts. On a supervisory level, the quality of police contact should be emphasized in performance evaluation criteria. And, with regard to field operations, individual officers should be given stable assignments in the neighborhoods so that they have sufficient time to develop quality interpersonal relations with the citizens they serve.

CONCLUSION

Community-based policing started out as an art, but without question, those police agencies forming partnerships with citizens in their communities work to transform this art into more of a science. The measures taken by the Los Angeles Police Department in Operation Cul-de-Sac ensure quality contacts between police and citizens and provide many of the keys necessary to "fine tune" the evolving science of community-based policing. •

Endnote

¹ Part I crimes include murder, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson.