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Research for Practice



How Police Supervisory Styles Influence Patrol Officer Behavior

**U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs**

810 Seventh Street N.W.

Washington, DC 20531

John Ashcroft

Attorney General

Deborah J. Daniels

Assistant Attorney General

Sarah V. Hart

Director, National Institute of Justice

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Findings and conclusions of the research reported here are those of the author and do not reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

This study was conducted using information from the Project on Policing Neighborhoods, directed by Stephen D. Mastrofski, Roger B. Parks, Albert J. Reiss, Jr., and Robert E. Worden. The project was supported by the National Institute of Justice under grant number 95-IJ-CX-0071.

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

When police officers put their cruisers in gear, how much will their field supervisor's style of supervision influence their performance when they deal with a fight in progress or an ongoing community problem?

A recent study found that a field supervisor's style may have a profound impact on patrol officer behavior. That's particularly true of the "active" style of supervision identified by the research.

What did the researchers find?

The study uncovered some surprising patterns in supervisory styles and patrol officer behavior. Four supervisory styles emerged from the research. The style identified as active was more likely than the others to influence officer behavior. This influence can be either positive or negative; for example, it can inspire subordinates to engage in more problem-solving activities, or it can result in more frequent use of force. An active supervisory style was also the most conducive to implementing community policing goals.

What were the study's limitations?

This research did not measure long-term patterns of supervision or address how supervisors communicate their priorities. It did not address mixed supervisory styles or explore whether supervisors adjust their styles in reaction to the officers they are assigned to supervise. For example, a squad with younger officers would most likely require a different supervisory style than one with more seasoned officers.

Study data came from urban police departments that were implementing problem-solving/community policing strategies. These findings may not apply to smaller, rural departments or those that are not implementing new strategies.

Who should read this study?

Police administrators, mid-level managers, field supervisors, and researchers, particularly those who focus on police organizations and management.

Robin Shepard Engel

How Police Supervisory Styles Influence Patrol Officer Behavior

This report is based on three journal articles by the author. Readers may refer to the articles for details on research findings and methodology (see “Recommended Reading”).

Does field supervision of patrol officers matter? Chances are that personal experience, common sense, and intuition would elicit a quick “yes” from most police administrators and managers. But does street-level evidence justify that viewpoint?

The answer is a qualified yes, according to recent field research. Research findings not only confirm that view but also shed light on how frontline supervisory styles can influence such patrol officer behavior as making arrests, issuing citations, using force, and engaging in community policing.

The study involved field observations of and interviews with sergeants and lieutenants who directly supervised patrol officers in the Indianapolis, Indiana, Police Department and the St. Petersburg, Florida, Police Department. The research is based on data from the Project on Policing Neighborhoods (POPEN), a 2-year research project sponsored by the National Institute of

Justice that broadly examined policing issues, especially the effects of community policing initiatives on police and the public (see “The Project on Policing Neighborhoods”).

The most important finding was that style or quality of field supervision can significantly influence patrol officer behavior, quite apart from quantity of supervision.¹ Frontline supervision by sergeants and lieutenants can influence some patrol officer behavior, but the study found that this influence varies according to the style of supervision. An “active” supervisory style—involving leading by example—seems to be most influential despite potential drawbacks. Indeed, active supervisors appear to be crucial to the implementation of organizational goals.

This report in NIJ’s Research for Practice series addresses three principal questions:

- What are the four supervisory styles identified by the research?

About the Author
Robin Shepard Engel, Ph.D., is associate professor of criminal justice at the University of Cincinnati.

Exhibit 1. Characteristics of 81 supervisors

Characteristics	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Supervisor age (years)	31	70	44
Years of experience as a supervisor	1	33	10
Percentage of supervisors who were female			15
Percentage of supervisors who were nonwhite			15
Percentage of supervisors who held a 4-year college degree			51
Amount of training* in community policing	1	5	4
Amount of knowledge† about community policing	1	3	2
Amount of training in supervision, management, leadership	1	5	4
Amount of knowledge about supervision, management, leadership	1	3	1

Note: 17 lieutenants and 64 sergeants.

*Amount of training: 1 = none, 2 = less than 1 day, 3 = 1–2 days, 4 = 3–5 days, 5 = more than 5 days.

†Amount of knowledge: 1 = very knowledgeable, 2 = fairly knowledgeable, 3 = not very knowledgeable.

- How do those styles influence patrol officer behavior?
- What are the implications for departmental policy and practice?

Frontline supervisory styles

The study’s field observations and interviews identified four main supervisory styles: traditional, innovative, supportive, and active. Supervisor characteristics include personal features such as

age as well as level of training and experience (see exhibit 1). Each of the four styles encompasses about 25 percent of the 81 field supervisors (see exhibit 2). In general, none of the four supervisory styles was found to be ideal. Each style has benefits and drawbacks. (See “Study Methodology.”)

The active style of supervision emerged as having the most influence over patrol officers’ behaviors. Officers with active supervisors were more likely than those with other types

Exhibit 2. Distribution of supervisory styles, in percent

	Traditional	Innovative	Supportive	Active
Gender				
Male (<i>n</i> = 69)	22	30	25	23
Female (<i>n</i> = 12)	50	8	17	25
Race				
White (<i>n</i> = 69)	26	26	25	23
Nonwhite (<i>n</i> = 12)	25	33	17	25
Location				
Indianapolis lieutenants (<i>n</i> = 17)	12	35	24	29
Indianapolis sergeants (<i>n</i> = 39)	18	28	26	28
St. Petersburg sergeants (<i>n</i> = 25)	48	20	20	12
Total (<i>N</i> = 81)	26	27	23	23

Note: Each percentage is the proportion of field supervisors associated with the style noted in the far left column. Thus, traditional supervisors constituted 26 percent of all 81 supervisors, 22 percent of 69 male supervisors, etc.

of supervisors to use force and spent more time on self-initiated activities, community policing activities, and problem solving.

Traditional supervisors.

Traditional supervisors expect aggressive enforcement from subordinates rather than engagement in community-oriented activities or policing of minor disorders. They are more likely than other types of supervisors to make decisions because they tend to take over encounters with citizens or tell officers how to handle those incidents.

Traditional sergeants and lieutenants are highly task oriented and expect subordinates to

produce measurable outcomes—particularly arrests and citations—along with paperwork and documentation.

Less inclined toward developing relationships, traditional supervisors give more instruction to subordinates and are less likely to reward and more likely to punish patrol officers. The traditional supervisor's ultimate concern is to control subordinate behavior.

Traditional supervisors are more likely to support new policing initiatives if they are consistent with aggressive law enforcement. More than 60 percent of these supervisors "agree strongly" that

THE PROJECT ON POLICING NEIGHBORHOODS

NIJ is committed to providing relevant research that helps practitioners in the field. This Research for Practice is one in a series of reports from the Project on Policing Neighborhoods (POPEN) conducted in 1996–1997. POPEN researchers examined police and citizen interaction, attitudes, and behaviors in 12 neighborhoods in Indianapolis, Indiana, and 12 similar neighborhoods in St. Petersburg, Florida. They directly observed patrol officers on duty, interviewed patrol officers and their supervisors, and conducted telephone surveys of individuals randomly selected in each neighborhood.

NIJ is publishing several reports that summarize scholarly reports and articles written by POPEN researchers. The summaries present key information that police managers need to know about problem solving and community policing. Additional topics will include encounters with juvenile suspects, gender differences in officer attitudes and behavior, police attitudes toward the public and the public's attitudes toward police, how officers spend their time with the community, and race and everyday policing.

Knowledge about how officers interact with neighborhood residents and other officers can help law enforcement administrators improve policies and practices and lead to better community relations. With this goal in mind, NIJ invites comments and suggestions concerning this research. To comment, write to Steve Edwards, National Institute of Justice, 810 Seventh Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20531; e-mail edwardss@ojp.usdoj.gov; or call 202–307–0500.

“enforcing the law is by far a patrol officer’s most important responsibility,” compared with 14 percent of innovative supervisors, 11 percent of supportive supervisors, and 11 percent of active supervisors. Along with their no-nonsense approach to

policing, traditional supervisors strictly enforce rules and regulations and adhere to the chain of command.

Innovative supervisors.

Innovative supervisors are characterized by a tendency to form relationships (i.e., they consider more officers to be friends), a low level of task orientation, and more positive views of subordinates. These supervisors are considered innovative because they generally encourage their officers to embrace new philosophies and methods of policing.

Innovative supervisors are defined by their expectations for community policing and problem-solving efforts by subordinates. For example, 96 percent of these supervisors reported that they “agree strongly” that “a good patrol officer will try to find out what residents think the neighborhood problems are,” compared to 48 percent of traditional supervisors, 68 percent of supportive supervisors, and 68 percent of active supervisors.

One goal of innovative supervisors is to help subordinates implement community policing and problem-solving strategies by coaching, mentoring, and facilitating. They

are less concerned with enforcing rules and regulations, report writing, or other task-oriented activities than traditional supervisors.

Unlike traditional supervisors, innovative supervisors generally do not tell subordinates how to handle situations and do not take over the situations themselves. They are more likely to delegate decisionmaking. They spend significantly more time per shift dealing with the public or other officers than other supervisors do (15 percent compared with 9 percent).

Supportive supervisors.

These supervisors support subordinates by protecting them from discipline or punishment perceived as “unfair” and by providing inspirational motivation. They often serve as a buffer between officers and management to protect officers from criticism and discipline. They believe this gives their officers space to perform duties without constant worry of disciplinary action for honest mistakes.

In some cases, supportive supervisors do not have strong ties to or positive relations with management. They may attempt to shield patrol officers from the police administration. Thus, some

supervisors classified as supportive may function more as “protectors” than “supporters.”

Of supportive supervisors, 68 percent reported that “protecting their officers from unfair criticism and punishment” is one of their most important functions, compared with 10 percent of traditional supervisors, 5 percent of innovative supervisors, and no active supervisors.

The protective role adopted by some supportive supervisors can be a problem, however. Other research has found that shielding officers from accountability mechanisms within the department can lead to police misconduct.²

Supportive supervisors are less concerned with enforcing rules and regulations, dealing with paperwork, or ensuring that officers do their work. They may encourage officers through praise and recognition, act as counselors, or display concern for subordinates’ personal and professional well-being. The study found that supportive supervisors praise or reward subordinate officers significantly more often during an average shift (3 times per

Officers with active supervisors spent more time on self-initiated activities, community-policing activities, and problem solving.

shift) than do other supervisors (2 times per shift).

Active supervisors. Active supervisors embrace a philosophy of leading by example. Their goal is to be heavily involved in the field alongside subordinates while controlling patrol officer behavior, thus performing the dual function of street officer and supervisor.

Almost all active supervisors (95 percent) report that they often go on their own initiative to incidents that their officers are handling, compared to 24 percent of traditional supervisors, 55 percent of innovative supervisors, and 68 percent of supportive supervisors.

Active supervisors also give importance to engaging in patrol work themselves. They spend significantly more time per shift than other supervisors on general motor patrol (33 percent compared with 26 percent) and traffic encounters (4 percent compared with 2 percent). These supervisors attempt to strike a balance between being active in the field and controlling subordinate behavior through constant, direct supervision. Supervisors with an active style are

characterized by directive decisionmaking, a strong sense of supervisory power, and a relatively positive view of subordinates.

Although active supervisors believe they have considerable influence over subordinates' decisions, they are less likely to encourage team building, coaching, or mentoring. One possible explanation for this is that they are reluctant to become so involved that they alienate subordinate officers. A fine line separates an active supervisor from being seen as overcontrolling or micromanaging.

Impact of supervisory style on patrol officers

What impact does supervisory style have on patrol officer activities? The study examined the influence of 64 sergeants' supervisory styles on the behavior of 239 patrol officers, having identified the sergeant-supervisor of each officer. The study's findings focus on how likely officers were to make arrests, issue citations, and use force as well as how much time per shift they allocated to community policing activities, administrative duties, and personal business.

Arrests and citations.

Supervisory style did not affect the likelihood that patrol officers would make arrests or issue citations in either traffic or nontraffic situations. In nontraffic encounters, however, the mere presence of a field supervisor, regardless of style, significantly influenced officer behavior; the longer a supervisor was present, the more likely patrol officers were to make an arrest.

Use of force. Patrol officers with active supervisors were twice as likely to use force³ against suspects as officers whose supervisors employ other styles. In addition, active supervisors themselves used force against suspects more often than other types of supervisors. The mere presence of a supervisor at the scene, however, did not have a significant influence on police use of force.

Self-initiated activities.

Patrol officers with active supervisors spent more time per shift engaging in proactive (self-initiated) activities than officers with other supervisors. The former spent 15 percent of their time per shift being proactive, in contrast to 14

COMMUNITY POLICING IN FIELD TRAINING AND SUPERVISION

Although not part of POPN research, a study conducted by Robin N. Haarr, Ph.D., under NIJ grant 96-IJ-CX-0060, also looked at influences on patrol officer behavior, particularly new recruits. This research also found that field supervisors have crucial influence, although in a different context.^a

A separate study of how police recruits are taught community policing principles provides some guidance for police managers on how field training and actual policing experience may supersede academy training in influencing the attitudes and beliefs of new officers.

The 3-year study surveyed police recruits at four intervals^b during their training and first year on the job. It focused on academy “reform training”^c designed to change recruits’ attitudes positively toward community-oriented policing and problem-solving policing.

The research found that academy reform training often proved ineffective because it was not followed up during field training, and factors contradicting academy training^d dominated recruits’ actual policing experiences.

The study also found that recruits’ beliefs about the nature of policing were firmly established before training even begins:

The best predictors of attitude change were by far the attitudes that recruits brought with them to the academy. In other words, police recruits are not empty vessels to be filled with new attitudes and values related to policing.^e

Nonetheless, academy reform training did influence recruits’ beliefs about police work before field training. But the study found “little evidence of a formal and/or systematic approach to incorporating community policing and/or problem-solving training into the field training process.”^f Thus, community policing principles—already on shaky

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ground because of recruits' previously held beliefs—often appeared to be academic:

It seems unreasonable to expect police recruits to continue their commitment to community policing and problem-solving policing principles and practices if they leave the training academy and return to a police agency that does not require its officers to engage in community policing or problem-solving activities.⁹

It falls to police leadership, the study concluded, to set the tone for community policing. When supervisors and the organization practice community-oriented and problem-solving policing, recruits will too. The study recommends that academy-taught principles be coupled more closely with field training and actual police practices.

NOTES

a. Haarr, R.N., *The Impact of Community Policing Training and Program Implementation on Police Personnel*, final report for the National Institute of Justice, grant number 96-IJ-CX-0060, Washington, DC; National Institute of Justice, 2000, NCJ 190680.

b. Surveys were administered on the first day at the academy, near the last day at the academy, 12 weeks later (near the end of field training), and at the end of 1 year on the job.

c. "Reform training" is defined as "training designed to alter an officer's perception of the world and/or police work. ... In the case of community policing training, the goal is to replace outdated attitudes and beliefs about policing with new attitudes and beliefs that are consistent with community policing and problem-solving policing philosophies and strategies." (Haarr, *The Impact of Community Policing Training and Program Implementation on Police Personnel*, pp. 3–4.)

d. Such as shift, coworkers' attitudes, and precinct location.

e. Haarr, p. v.

f. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

g. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

percent, 13 percent, and 11 percent for officers under supportive, traditional, and innovative supervisors, respectively. Proactivity excludes time spent on dispatched or supervisor-directed activities, general patrol, traveling to a location, personal business, and administrative activities.

Community policing and problem solving. Officers with active supervisors spent more time per shift engaging in problem solving and other community-policing activities than officers with other types of supervisors. Officers under active supervision spent 11.3 percent of their time per shift on problem solving, compared with 10.7 percent for officers with supportive supervisors, 9.4 percent for those with traditional supervisors, and 8.0 percent for officers with innovative supervisors. Although differences between these percentages seem small, they can produce substantial differences in the amount of time spent on community policing by an entire patrol force over the course of a year.

At first glance it appears contradictory that officers with innovative supervisors spent the least amount of time on community policing and

problem solving. This finding suggests that simply having an innovative supervisory style does not necessarily translate into more innovative activities from subordinates.

Possibly, innovative supervisors may be more inclined to encourage community-building tactics, while active supervisors may encourage more aggressive enforcement, which may lead active supervisors and their subordinates to be more engaged with problem solving and other citizen interactions.

Administrative activities.

Patrol officers with active supervisors spend significantly less time per shift on administrative tasks. Officers under active supervision spent 13 percent of their time dealing with administrative matters, compared with 19 percent for patrol officers with traditional supervisors and 17 percent for those with innovative or supportive supervisors.

Personal business. Supervisory style has little effect on the time patrol officers spend conducting personal business (nonwork-related encounters and activities, including meal and restroom breaks). Overall, officers spent 16 percent of their time on personal business.

Implications for policy and practice

Collectively, the research findings indicate that supervisory styles affect some types of subordinate behavior. Police administrators are encouraged to consider supervisory style in setting department goals and training.

Compared with other styles, an active supervisory approach appears to wield the most influence over patrol officer actions. The findings suggest that to best influence their patrol officers' behavior, field supervisors must lead by example—the hallmark of an active style.

One clear implication of the research is that police administrators and managers would be well-advised to direct and train field supervisors to become more involved and set an example of the behavior they expect from subordinates. (For discussion of a different study that examined supervisory practices and officer training, see “Community Policing in Field Training and Supervision.”)

An active supervisory style, however, has potential problems. Leading by example can be positive or negative, depending on the example

By taking precisely the risks that he/she wants the officer to take, the active supervisor demonstrates that “if it’s safe for Sarge, then it’s safe for me, too.”

set. As noted previously, for instance, active supervisors and their subordinates are more likely to use force against suspects.

One reason why active supervisors might promote greater use of force and proactivity (which could expose the officer to greater risk if things go wrong) is that by taking precisely the risks that he/she wants the officer to take, the active supervisor demonstrates that “if it’s safe for Sarge, then it’s safe for me, too.”

Supervisory styles influenced only those officer behaviors that are hardest to monitor and measure, such as use of force, problem solving, and proactivity. Conversely, supervisory styles did not significantly affect officer behaviors that are relatively easy to monitor and measure, such as making arrests and issuing citations. One reason may be that supervisors have more influence in situations where patrol officers have the most discretion. Perhaps the less certain the task and the less visible its performance, the more opportunity a sergeant may have to define the duties of subordinates, who may appreciate such clarification of their roles.

Another possible explanation is that such easily measured officer activities as arrests and citations may be most influenced by policy guidelines from higher ranking officials. This effect is likely to be relatively uniform regardless of field supervisors’ styles. Thus, the place to look for supervisory influence over these activities may be at the district or departmental level, not the field supervisory level.

Leading by example is an effective frontline supervisory tool only if the example supports departmental goals. For instance, many officers at both sites had received relatively little training in community policing and were skeptical about its worth. Sergeants who practiced an active supervisory style supplemented training deficiencies while building the self-confidence of subordinate officers.

These findings strongly suggest that police administrators are more likely to achieve departmental goals if they align them with supervisory practice and encourage field supervisors to “get in the game.”

STUDY METHODOLOGY

This study used data collected for the POPN multimethod study of police patrol in the Indianapolis, Indiana, and St. Petersburg, Florida, police departments, which were implementing community policing at the time of the study.

The core methodology was systematic social observation of patrol officers in the field. Trained observers accompanied officers on their work shifts and took field notes. Officers assigned to each of the 24 study beats were observed for approximately 240 hours. Researchers observed more than 5,700 hours of patrol work during the summer of 1996 in Indianapolis and the summer of 1997 in St. Petersburg. From their field notes, observers prepared narratives and coded data items about officer activities.

Researchers also interviewed patrol officers and frontline supervisors about their personal characteristics, training and education, work experience, perceptions of their beats, attitudes toward the police role, and perceptions of their department's implementation of community policing and problem solving. Participation was voluntary and confidential. To encourage candid responses to potentially sensitive questions about the quality of supervision, officers were not asked for their supervisors' names. Officers were matched with sergeants through other information.

Review of prior research identified 10 attitudinal dimensions that potentially shape supervisors' styles:

- How they make decisions.
- How they distribute power.
- The extent to which they attempt or avoid exerting leadership.
- The priority they place on aggressive enforcement.
- The priority they attach to community policing and problem solving.
- How they view subordinates.
- Whether they engage in inspirational motivation.
- How task oriented they are.
- Whether they focus on building friendships and mutual trust with subordinates.
- Whether they focus on protecting subordinates from unfair criticism and punishment.

Factor analysis of these dimensions revealed the four individual supervisory styles: traditional, innovative, supportive, and active.

Notes

1. “Quantity” is used here in the sense of amount of supervision, i.e., the number of supervisors, the amount of interaction between supervisors and subordinates, and time spent on supervised encounters between patrol officers and citizens. This study is unique in its focus on the quality and style—as well as quantity—of patrol officer supervision.

2. For example, see Christopher Commission, *Report of the Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department*, Los Angeles Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department, 1991; Mollen Commission to Investigate Allegations of Police Corruption, *Commission Report*, New York: The Mollen Commission, 1994; Skolnik, J.H., and J.J. Fyfe, *Above the Law: Police and the Excessive Use of Force*, New York: Free Press, 1993; and Kappeler, V.E., R.D. Sluder, and G.P. Alpert, *Forces of Deviance: Understanding the Dark Side of Policing*, 2d edition, Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1998.

3. Use of force includes firm grip or nonpain restraint, pain compliance (hammerlock, wristlock, finger grip, carotid control, bar arm lock), impact or incapacitation (striking with body or weapon, mace, taser), or drawing or discharging a firearm.

Recommended reading

This report was based on the following articles:

Engel, R., “Patrol Officer Supervision in the Community Policing Era,” *Journal of*

Criminal Justice 30(1) (January/February 2002): 51–64.

Engel, R., “Supervisory Styles of Patrol Sergeants and Lieutenants,” *Journal of Criminal Justice* 29(4) (July/August 2001): 341–355.

Engel, R., “The Effects of Supervisory Styles on Patrol Officer Behavior,” *Police Quarterly* 3(3) (September 2000): 262–293.

Other related articles and reports. Bergner, L., “Building Teamwork Among Officers,” *Law Enforcement Trainer* 12(6) (November/December 1997): 10–12.

Haarr, R., “Making of a Community Policing Officer: The Impact of Basic Training and Occupational Socialization on Police Recruits,” *Police Quarterly* 4(4) (December 2001): 402–433.

Mastrofski, S., R. Parks, A. Reiss, Jr., and R. Worden, *Policing Neighborhoods: A Report from St. Petersburg*, Research Preview, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, July 1999, NCJ 184370.

Mastrofski, S., R. Parks, A. Reiss, Jr., and R. Worden, *Policing Neighborhoods: A*

Report from Indianapolis, Research Preview, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, July 1998, NCJ 184207.

Mastrofski, S., R. Parks, and R. Worden, *Community Policing in Action: Lessons from an Observational Study*, Final Report to the National Institute of Justice, 1998.

Weisburd, D., and R. Greenspan, et al., *Police Attitudes Toward Abuse of Authority: Findings From a*

National Study, Research in Brief, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, May 2000, NCJ 181312.

Community policing. For more information on community policing, visit the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services Web site at www.usdoj.gov/cops/ or write to U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 1100 Vermont Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20530.

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