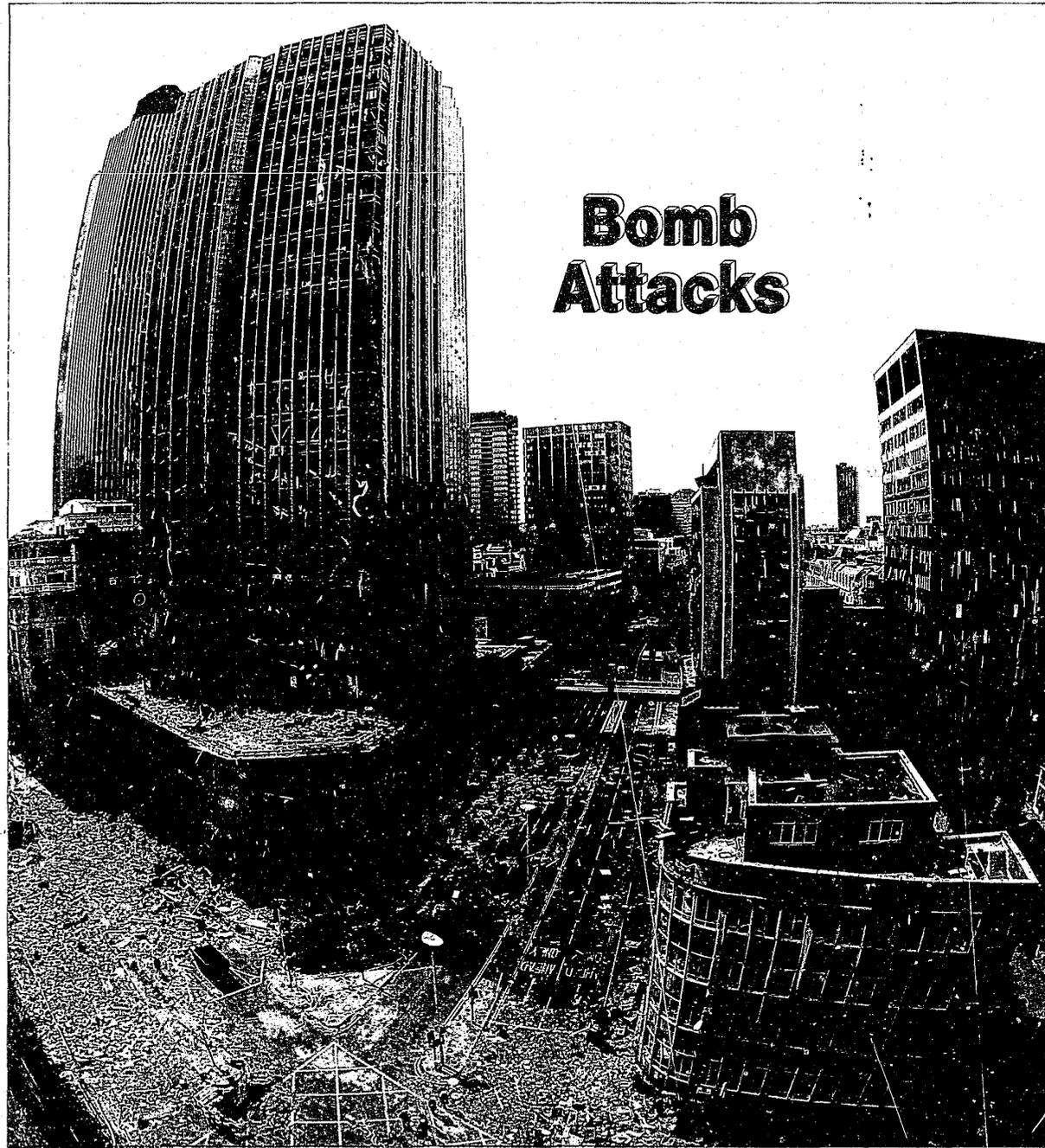


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Louis J. Freeh
Director

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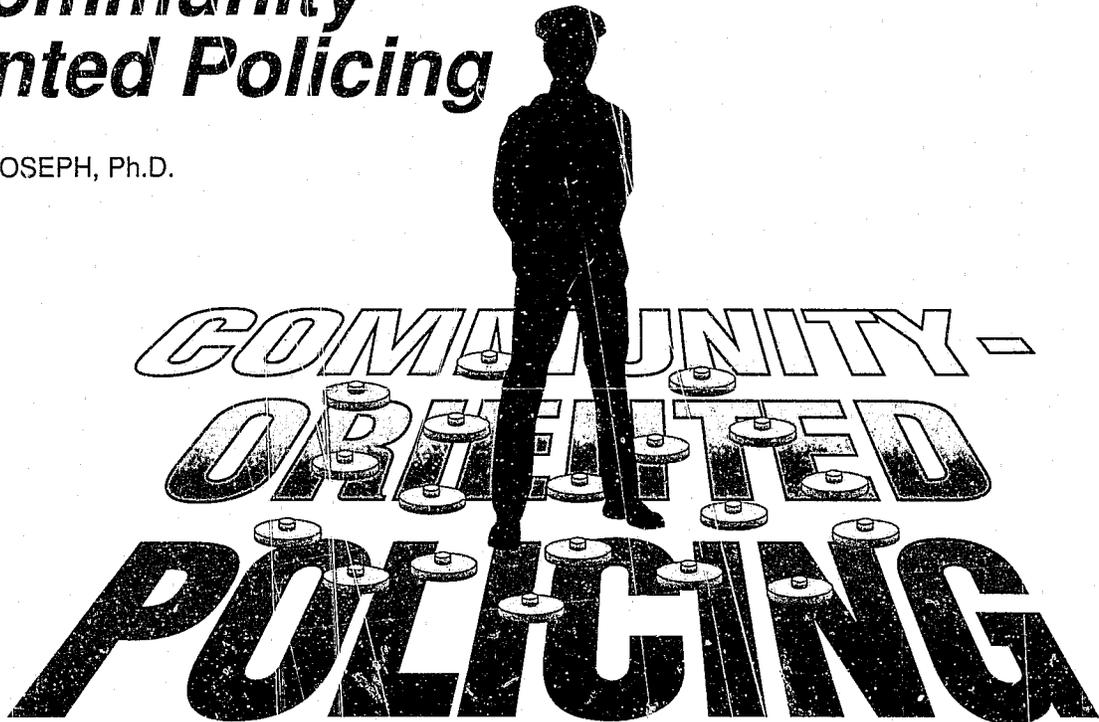
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Walking the Minefields of Community-Oriented Policing

By
THOMAS M. JOSEPH, Ph.D.



Crime has become one of the most persistent problems facing the United States. During the past 30 years, communities around the Nation have witnessed a dramatic rise in crime rates. In fact, the rate of *violent* crime in the United States is worse than in any other industrialized Nation.¹

Criminal activity nationwide is so vast that it is difficult to correlate statistically to any other social factor. For instance, while the American population has grown 41 percent since 1961, the rate of violent crimes has risen over 500 percent and total crimes have increased by more than 300 percent.²

Even more ominous, despite a steady decline in birth rates since the mid-1960s, youths represent the fastest-growing segment of the expanding criminal population. Data indicate a four-fold increase in juvenile arrests from 1965 to 1990, involving not only disadvantaged minority youths from urban areas but also youths of all races, social classes, and lifestyles.³

For citizens, such developments yield an ironic reaction. They fear becoming victims of criminal activity, while at the same time, they build a greater tolerance to crime and its effects on society.

For law enforcement, the conspicuous rise in crime has led to a

reevaluation of everything from weapons to policing strategies. As the 1990s progress, a growing number of agencies will embark on the path to community-oriented policing (COP) as a way to address the causes, rather than merely the effects, of crime. As administrators pursue this undertaking, however, they should understand that the road ahead harbors many potential obstacles. To avoid disaster, administrators should maintain a proper perspective concerning crime, the administration of justice, and the potential of law enforcement to impact criminal activity. In short, they must learn to walk the minefields of community-oriented policing.

PUTTING CRIME IN PERSPECTIVE

From a strictly functional perspective, crime can be viewed as inevitable due to individual differences in character manifested through behavior. A society without crime is inconceivable.

Crime becomes a social problem when criminal behavior violates important values and harms or threatens property, individuals, and social institutions. Likewise, crime becomes a problem when the law and the agencies of justice prove maladapted to the interests of society at large. Equally troubling problems emerge if legal strategies for "rebalancing" the situation fail to protect the community or correct the criminal. It appears that many citizens believe this latter scenario currently confronts the Nation.

LAW ENFORCEMENT'S RESPONSE

Despite the decentralized nature of American law enforcement, some creative and innovative approaches to crime fighting have developed in recent years. In addition to technological advances, programs in the human development arena have been brought into the war against crime. One such development, as old as metropolitan policing itself, is crime prevention.

The more modern version of crime prevention can be described as anticipating, recognizing, and appraising the risks of crime while initiating some action to remove or reduce these risks.⁴ Within this framework, citizens and law enforcement traditionally make a cooperative effort to reduce the

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Detective Joseph serves with the Kirkwood, Missouri, Police Department

threat, as well as the impact, of crime. More recently, this philosophy has been incorporated into problem-oriented and community-oriented policing. In each case, the philosophy is based on the idea that law enforcement officers and private citizens can work together to help solve problems perceived to be related to crime and the fear of crime, as well as the social and physical disorder of urban decay.

This philosophy assumes that police agencies, acting as instruments of the government, can be effective in developing more productive relationships with law-abiding citizens in the community by giving these citizens a greater voice in setting local police priorities. Accordingly, this approach provides citizens an opportunity to improve the quality of life in their communities by shifting the focus of law enforcement from one of responding to calls for service to solving community problems as they relate to crime.⁵

The primary objective of this approach is to obtain citizen input

and participation. In part, its appeal rests with the voluntary cooperation and involvement of community groups. Additionally, this orientation acknowledges that law enforcement cannot actually succeed without sharing responsibility with the community to combat crime effectively. In essence, this philosophy has been presented as an underlying foundation for how police officers should think and act.⁶

The popularity of this approach cannot be denied. In the face of collapsing social institutions—the failure of primary and secondary schools to educate, the deterioration of the traditional family structure, the lack of affordable housing and health services, and the shortage of residential care for the mentally ill—community-oriented policing is viewed as the foundation by which law enforcement can contend with the resulting debris. Of course, this approach presumes that police can make a difference by attacking the root causes of crime as opposed to merely responding to recurring problems.

THE MINEFIELDS

Although the arguments put forth by the proponents of the community-oriented approach appear logical and very appealing at a time when the Nation faces an alarming growth in violent criminal behavior, police administrators should exercise caution. Given that some hail community-oriented policing as a commonsense answer to rampant crime, there should be an effort to evaluate carefully what this "new" orientation advocates. It appears that the law enforcement community has made a commitment to the ideals encompassed in community-oriented policing. The real question remains: Can the police meet this commitment and make a real difference?

The answer actually will be determined in future evaluations of the efforts of individual departments. However, there exist some realistic implications of the COP philosophy that require immediate consideration. As with crime prevention programs in general, community-oriented policing has a number of potential weaknesses.

Approach

The first potential weakness rests in the specific approach adopted. In many agencies that adopt the COP approach to crime, COP becomes an underlying foundation of the law enforcement effort as opposed to merely a strategy that can be applied to real-world situations within the community. But, by making COP an underlying foundation, departments risk subordinating all prevention efforts to a single philosophy—that police organizations are

responsible for solving the social problems traditionally linked to crime. Should this philosophy prevail and follow the same path as many previous crime prevention programs, COP could become a program of symbolism instead of substance.

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In the past, police administrators often talked very forcefully in support of crime prevention only to fail, for whatever reason, to establish realistic, goal-oriented management practices. These administrators fell short of fully integrating these units into the overall structure of agencies because crime prevention staffs worked outside the agency's operational hierarchy. The results created the perception, especially among operational units, that crime prevention was not "real police work."

Due to the structure of crime prevention operations, officers in those units were seen as a front-line public relations buffer. Accordingly, officers in these units often received assignments that had little to do with crime prevention, such as public or media relations, and other

tasks deemed desirable by agency administrators. Left unchecked, this can lead to crime prevention units not being integrated with traditional patrol and investigative activities—in other words, segregated from the department.

The risk is that a community-oriented policing effort could become simply another specialized function within the department—distinct from other agency activities.⁷ Such an approach almost undoubtedly would doom an agency's community-oriented policing efforts.

Evaluation

Without question, the greatest potential problem posed by the COP philosophy, like that posed by traditional crime prevention efforts, is the question of evaluation and accountability. What methods and measures will be used to determine success or failure? And, will such strategies be politically motivated or public safety-oriented?

In reality, the issue of methods and measures will take place on two different and distinct levels. The first level is that of the department; the second, that of the individual officer.

On the department level, evaluation efforts must be comprehensive. To that end, administrators should obtain citizen and officer perceptions, as well as data, concerning crime rates. Depending on an agency's size and the expertise available for such analysis, administrators may deem it more realistic to assign the responsibility of evaluation to an outside organization rather than to a component within

the agency. Generally, outside evaluation lends credibility and standardization to an analysis.

The second level of evaluation, that of officer performance, does not lend itself to the more "packaged" approach possible with departmental analysis. Because COP programs remain somewhat open to empirical question, the issue of how to evaluate officer performance becomes an important consideration.⁸ If community-oriented policing is to become the way police officers perform their duties, performance evaluations become crucial to the overall equation and strategy.

Traditionally, officer performance has been evaluated through easily quantifiable measures, such as the number of suspects arrested, tickets and warnings issued, calls handled, and cases cleared, as well as the evaluation of desirable traits. Realistically, such measures no longer may be of value to a department that incorporates the COP approach. An agency that trains and expects officers to perform as community-oriented police officers should develop performance instruments that measure crime prevention activities, as well as problem-solving initiatives. Without such measuring systems, merit and rewards become moot.

Training and Tactics

Two other important issues—training and tactics—must be reviewed with any commitment to a COP philosophy. Obviously, if community-

oriented policing is adopted as the way officers perform their duties, proper training becomes a crucial factor to success. Officers must be adequately trained in community policing methods.

In San Diego, California, for example, police officers undergo 8 hours of inservice training with reference to the problem-oriented approach. Officers receive instruction on how to identify a problem, analyze it, and with the assistance of the community, design a solution. While some disagreement exists at this time as to the level of formal and inservice training necessary, the general consensus implies that training should not be shorted.

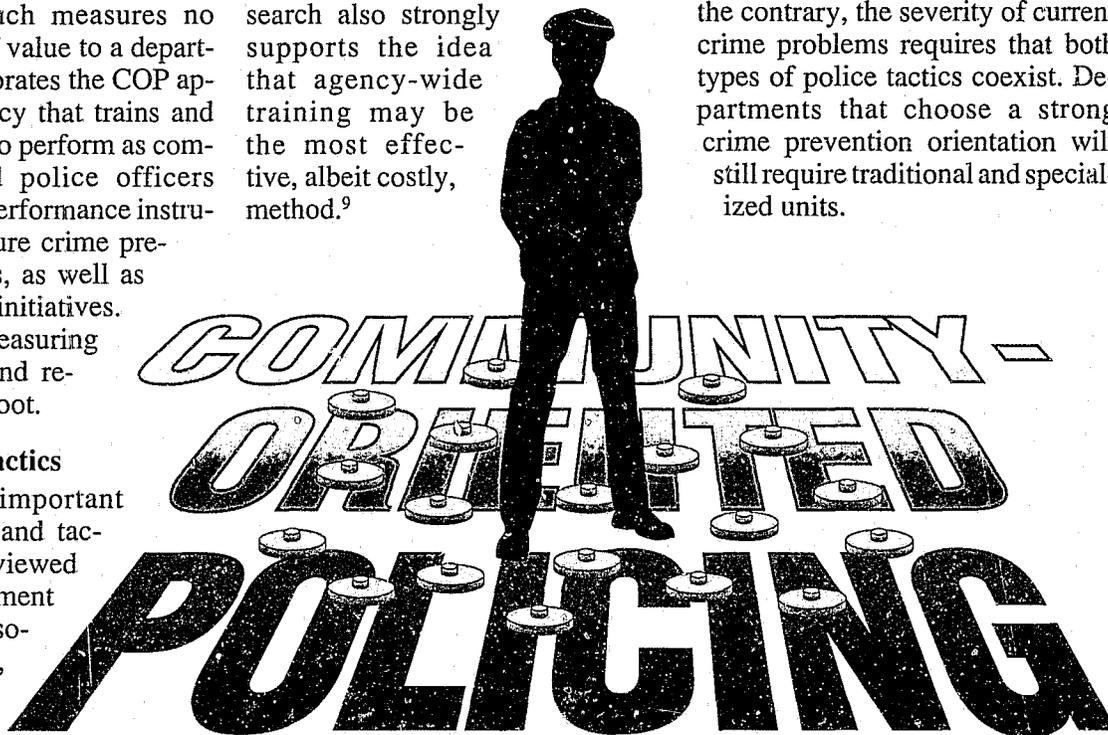
To this extent, the St. Louis, Missouri, Police Department provides such training on a department-wide basis. Research also strongly supports the idea that agency-wide training may be the most effective, albeit costly, method.⁹

In terms of tactics, proponents of COP may suggest that this approach changes only the *practices* of law enforcement, not the objectives. Frequently, the debate over the COP design is placed within the context of a conservative versus liberal approach.¹⁰

Perceptions of COP

As is often the case, new methods of policing may quickly be labeled as "soft on crime." Unfortunately, this has been no less true for COP efforts. Further, because COP focuses on community problems, municipalities risk creating the perception that individuals should not be held accountable for their behavior.

To be an effective strategy then, community policing must not be presented to citizens as a choice between "hard" or "soft" policing. On the contrary, the severity of current crime problems requires that both types of police tactics coexist. Departments that choose a strong crime prevention orientation will still require traditional and specialized units.



Administrators, supervisors, and line officers must clearly understand that community-oriented policing should not be viewed as a substitute for centralized police efforts. COP, at any level, should be viewed only as a means to a goal, not the goal. In the final analysis, the major objectives of police organizations remain those of public safety and security.

THE FUTURE

The ideal of crime prevention is founded on reasonable and valid foundations and should remain a guiding orientation for law enforcement agencies. Community-oriented policing offers a natural path by which crime prevention can be taken into the next century.

However, in order for these programs to be effective, police administrators must recognize that such programs can be beneficial only if they become part of the operational practices of individual agencies. Likewise, the techniques and strategies of the COP philosophy should be integrated into the daily operations of all street officers. If pursued properly, this orientation should help to create the desired partnership between the police and the community.

Still, an additional word of caution is necessary. The most perilous dangers posed by community-oriented policing reside in the same quagmire that has often engulfed other government attempts to deal with major social problems, especially conditions related to criminal behavior. The first rule of order with government attempts to confront a social problem should be

that they do no harm. Government programs often do unintended damage to segments of the population that the programs were designed to assist.

All programs, including COP, contain built-in flaws. Therefore, before instituting any program, regardless of the governmental level, administrators must answer some basic, but easily overlooked, questions. What kind of behavior will

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this program encourage? Does the program promote individual responsibility or dependency? Will this program provide effective assistance to public order, or will it simply divert funding to additional levels of bureaucracy?

Finally, administrators must decide whether community-oriented policing functions represent an activity with which their department should be involved. Only by addressing these concerns can administrators fully prepare themselves, their agencies, and their communities for community-oriented policing.

CONCLUSION

Whether community-oriented policing delivers and helps to rebuild the Nation's infrastructure of social order remains a question yet unanswered. However, police administrators should remember that enhancing safety and order represent the first responsibility of any law enforcement agency. To promise communities unconditionally that police officers can solve the social problems associated with crime—the very problems that more grandiose and more fully funded programs have failed to resolve—is to mislead citizens in a most serious way. ♦

Endnotes

¹ William J. Bennett, *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators*, Washington, DC: Empower America, The Heritage Foundation and Free Congress Foundation, March 1993, 2.

² See *Crime in the U.S.*, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Washington, DC, for years 1960 through 1991, and U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, "Lifetime Likelihood of Victimization," Washington, DC, March 1987.

³ *Crime in the U.S.*, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Washington, DC, 1991.

⁴ *Understanding Crime Prevention*, National Crime Prevention Institute (Boston: Butterworth's, 1986), 2.

⁵ Robert Trojanowicz and Bonnie Bucqueroux, *Community Policing: A Contemporary Perspective* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Anderson, 1990), 5.

⁶ Herman Goldstein, *Problem-Oriented Policing* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990).

⁷ Jerome Skolnick and David Bayley, *Community Policing: Issues and Practices Around the World* (Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice, May 1988).

⁸ While numerous case studies have been conducted, longitudinal analysis remains a concern.

⁹ *National Institute of Justice Journal*, U.S. Department of Justice, 1992.

¹⁰ Supra note 6, 90.