



National Institute of Justice

Research Preview

Jeremy Travis, Director

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Policing Neighborhoods: A Report From St. Petersburg

Summary of research by Stephen D. Mastrofski, Michigan State University; Roger B. Parks, Indiana University; Albert J. Reiss, Jr., Yale University; and Robert E. Worden, University at Albany, State University of New York

Agencies implementing community policing are striving to change how police do their work and what contributions citizens make to policing. Researchers are exploring what policing is like in St. Petersburg, Florida, a city that has implemented community policing. This Research Preview reports findings from the Project on Policing Neighborhoods, sponsored by the National Institute of Justice and the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. A similar report on community policing in Indianapolis, Indiana, was published in July 1998.

Methodology

In 1997, the researchers observed police officers for approximately 240 hours in each of 12 of St. Petersburg's 48 Community Policing Areas (CPAs). These CPAs were selected to represent variation in social distress (determined by the amount of unemployment and poverty and the number of female-headed households), which affects service conditions for police. Field researchers observed 911 officers responsible for answering calls for service, Community Policing Officers (CPOs) free to focus on problem solving, and supervisors assigned to the selected CPAs. Researchers also personally interviewed nearly all St. Petersburg patrol officers (n=240) and their immediate supervisors (n=37). In addition, more than 1,900 randomly selected residents of St. Petersburg were surveyed by telephone.

Findings

Police role. Community policing expands an officer's role beyond just law enforcement. Interviews revealed some ambivalence in officers' perception of their role. Ninety-eight percent of officers agreed that assisting citizens is as important as enforcing the law, but 88 percent also said that enforcing the law is an officer's most important responsibility. Almost all officers agreed that citizen input about neighborhood problems is important, but 25 percent said they have reason to distrust most citizens.

CPOs generally favored views associated with community policing more than did 911 officers. They were much more likely than 911 officers to say that minor disorders were police business. They were far more likely to rank reducing repeat calls for

service as an important goal and far less likely to rank handling their call load or making arrests as important goals. Some views were related to officers' length of service. Experienced officers were more likely to expect officers to respond to all minor disorders except family disputes (on which there were no clear differences by length of service). They were less likely to stress the importance of making arrests, issuing citations, and performing drug and gun interdictions and were more likely to view public involvement in neighborhood improvement and reducing fear of crime as important. Contrary to assumptions common to many researchers and practitioners, newer police officers were not the ones with the most positive outlook on community policing.

Allocation of officer time. The researchers found that the St. Petersburg officers they studied spent, on average, between one-fourth and one-third of their time not on specific tasks, but rather on general patrol or personal business. Contrary to widely held beliefs about the reactive nature of police patrol, 911 officers were typically free of dispatcher or supervisor assignments for 5–6 hours of their 8-hour shift. Because of the nature of CPOs' job assignments, virtually all of their time was available for self-directed activities, including officer-initiated encounters with the public, involvement with other government agencies, administrative tasks, general patrol, and personal business.

The proactive nature of patrol work in St. Petersburg is revealed by the rate of officer-initiated encounters with the public. On average, 911 officers initiated approximately 45 percent of their public contacts; CPOs, approximately 66 percent. Dispatch calls, supervisor assignments, and contacts initiated directly by citizens at a scene or by telephone accounted for the balance.

Not surprisingly, CPOs spent substantially more time engaged in problem-solving activities than 911 officers (17 percent and 7–10 percent, respectively, depending on the shift). Eighty-three percent of CPOs indicated involvement with a problem-solving project in the past year, as did 57 percent of 911 officers.

Police-citizen interactions. Community policing is generally concerned with solving problems, but also is concerned with enhancing the quality of police-citizen interactions. Researchers found that CPOs tended to spend substantially less time in face-to-face contact with citizens than 911 officers. CPOs had a

somewhat lower rate of contact with the public in general, but they also had much lower rates of contact with suspects/disputants and help-seekers while having much higher rates of strictly social contacts.

Community policing promotes greater police-citizen cooperation. The researchers found a relatively high level of such cooperation in everyday police-citizen contacts. The police made a positive response to at least one request from citizens 85 percent of the time. Citizens responded positively to at least one request or demand from police approximately 82 percent of the time.

Citizen perceptions. Under community policing, citizens play two important roles—as consumers of police services and as coproducers of policing itself. Eighty-five percent of the interviewed citizens said they were “very” or “somewhat” satisfied with their neighborhood police services. Black respondents were somewhat less likely to give these responses than whites. Two-thirds of survey respondents rated St. Petersburg police as “excellent” or “good” at working with residents to solve problems. Whites were substantially more likely than blacks to give a strong rating, but blacks were more aware of police-citizen problem-solving efforts and were more likely to report participation in such efforts.

Establishing a visible and familiar police presence is important to most police agencies. Approximately one-third of residents surveyed said they had seen the police in the previous 24 hours. Twenty-eight percent of all interviewed residents said they knew police officers who worked in their neighborhoods. The researchers examined the relationship between a resident knowing an officer and offering a favorable rating of the police. Familiarity with neighborhood police was associated with positive ratings of police among blacks and other minorities but did not affect ratings of whites.

Conclusion

The research showed that community policing clearly made inroads in the outlook of St. Petersburg officers and that the strength of those effects is related to whether an officer has a specialized community policing assignment or serves as a general patrol officer. There were a number of distinctions

between the behavior of CPOs and that of 911 officers. This suggests that considerable care is warranted concerning how officer responsibilities are constructed if departments are to promote community policing attitudes and behavior. Regardless of job assignments, St. Petersburg patrol officers have substantial self-directed time available for targeted activities. The challenge is to find ways to coordinate and supervise these activities effectively. Citizens of St. Petersburg are relatively satisfied with police services, which compares to responses to surveys in other U.S. cities. Although minority citizens tended to evaluate their police somewhat lower than whites did, they showed a stronger willingness to become involved in problem solving. This represents an excellent opportunity for strengthening police-community relations and improving the quality of life in minority neighborhoods. These and other research results have been used by the St. Petersburg Police Department to develop and implement plans for the future. Detailed information on these and other community policing issues will be forthcoming in future project reports.

This document is based on research conducted by Stephen D. Mastrofski, Ph.D., Professor, Michigan State University; Roger B. Parks, Ph.D., Professor, Indiana University; Albert J. Reiss, Jr., Ph.D., Professor Emeritus, Yale University; and Robert E. Worden, Ph.D., Associate Professor, University at Albany, State University of New York. The research was sponsored under NIJ grant number 95-IJ-CX-0071, with funds from the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. **This and other NIJ publications can be found at and downloaded from the NIJ Web site (<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij>).**

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