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## Improving Services at Small- and Medium-Sized Police Agencies during a Recession

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Until recently, California police agencies could not find enough qualified applicants to fill their ranks; now, officers are being laid off. Public safety agencies are not invulnerable to budget cuts and workforce reductions. A 2009 national survey of 233 police organizations found that 63 percent of respondents reported making plans to cut their budgets.<sup>1</sup> While the Great Recession of 2009 has severely strained local law enforcement agency budgets, the public's expectations have not diminished. "There's a collision between high and rising demands for government services," the Washington Post's Robert Samuelson warns, "and the capacity of the economy to produce the income and tax revenue to pay for those demands."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it has been recognized for some time that decreasing police budgets would require the development of more effective policing methods.<sup>3</sup>

The most recent recruitment brochure for a police chief in California speaks to this issue, citing the need to "balance the operational needs with the budget/resource constraints and determine how best to maintain the service levels, given the state of the budget locally as well as statewide." How is it possible to improve services during these tough times? Private-sector companies found ways to do more with fewer workers by becoming leaner and more efficient in the last year; however, government agencies have been slower to respond to this adjustment. Nonetheless, the following activities yield the most from available resources:

- Obtain a community mandate to identify what matters most
- Use officer discretionary time to advance agency goals
- Innovate through collaboration

### Obtain a Community Mandate

Community consultation involves an organized process to involve citizens in the department's planning process. It promotes equity, access, and participation and may result in the establishment of a consensus-based mandate. While local government routinely incorporates community consultation into the development of city and county

general plans, law enforcement often does not facilitate that level of citizen participation. Whether that lack is the result of tradition, independence, or the idea that the police should decide what is important is irrelevant—people now expect to have a role in making important decisions.

**Santa Cruz CAP Program:** The United Way's Community Assessment Project (CAP) offers an alternative model. CAP is a consortium of public and private health, education, human service, and civic organizations. CAP was convened in 1995 to measure and improve the quality of life in Santa Cruz County by raising public awareness, providing accurate information, setting community goals, and supporting collaborative action plans to achieve those goals.

A community mandate informs the police about the issues the public considers most important to their quality of life and authorizes police action in response to these issues. In a transparent and inclusive process, the question, "What will it take for us, in this community, to achieve our public safety goals?"<sup>4</sup> reframes the issue of how police resources should be managed and supports the development of a community crime prevention plan.

Obtaining a community mandate takes a great deal of work but offers many benefits: It supports a productive relationship between citizens and the police, provides opportunities to establish new relationships in the community, increases citizen satisfaction and police legitimacy, promotes public awareness of safety issues, and allows the police to concentrate its limited resources on those issues citizens care about most. Police will always respond to and investigate serious crimes, but knowing what matters most to the community provides departments the opportunity to prioritize activities.

Between 1995 and 2009, the Santa Cruz CAP successfully channeled community concerns to achieve desired outcomes. When CAP identified alarming rates of youth alcohol and drug abuse in 1995, a coalition of more than 110 agencies and individuals addressed the problem to reverse the trend, and the problem of abuse declined at a greater rate than the state's average.<sup>5</sup> Other notable achievements of CAP follow:

- A committee was formed to commission a homeless census and needs assessment that led to the award of a \$4 million federal grant to prevent homelessness and promote rapid rehousing in 2000.
- A county-wide effort, consisting of 20 organizations, created an initiative in 2004 to improve health care for children that resulted in the Healthy Kids Plan, providing medical, dental, and other services to minors regardless of income level.

Community cooperation on important issues can tap enormous reserves of energy that can be focused to improve conditions. Survey after survey show that people are concerned about crime; yet consider the 2009 CAP community goal for public safety: "By the year 2010, crime within Santa Cruz County will continue to decrease and residents will have increased confidence in their personal safety at home and in the community."<sup>6</sup> This goal is undefined and there is no action plan to achieve the objective. There is no reason why law enforcement agencies cannot play a more substantive role in harnessing community concerns to transform vague notions of supporting the local police to an involved citizenry that actively participates in identifying problems, suggesting solutions, and insisting that police have the resources to accomplish community goals.

**International CAP Efforts:** While CAP provides a good framework for basing community goals on reliable information, something else is necessary to turn the

process into an action plan. Based on national strategies, jurisdictions in Canada and Australia produce comprehensive community crime prevention plans. The Canadian model emphasizes inclusion of underrepresented groups and community mobilization; the Australian model relies on community focus groups and an evidence-based approach.<sup>7</sup> Both systems are presented in terms of political and social processes instead of being the exclusive domain of law enforcement. It is necessary, or even desirable, to replicate these systems; law enforcement in the United States continues to be a local responsibility. However, these models contain principles that may be adapted for use by local police agencies.

## Use Discretionary Time to Advance Goals

A study of the San Jose Police Department in 2000 by the city's auditor determined that 37 percent of its patrol officer's time was uncommitted.<sup>8</sup> This figure is not unusual; a 2009 survey, conducted by the author, of 13 California police agencies of various sizes indicated, on average, that 37.8 percent of officer time was discretionary. Officer time is the agency's most valuable and expensive resource; the issue of how best to use that time is critical to accomplishing the agency's mission. However, no definitive standard exists to determine appropriate discretionary time levels or even staffing levels—these ratios vary from department to department based on a variety of factors, not least of which are community expectations.

A workload study determines how much work the agency generates and its capacity to produce work. The study should encompass patrol, investigations, traffic, administration, and other major divisions to provide a complete picture of the agency's capacity, avoid unintentional redundant functions, and eliminate conflicts between divisions.

The results will enable the department to consider a variety of options, including staffing deployment, investigative prioritization, workload balancing, reorganization, and other means to support the agency's primary goals—a portion of which may be established through community consultation. In other words, a process that encourages a representative sample of citizens to help identify what matters most to them and what they expect from their local police or sheriff will play an important role in determining what the department prioritizes and why it uses its resources as it does.

The 1974 Kansas City Preventive Patrol Experiment was among the first to question whether or not police strategies did what they were supposed to do and ask how those strategies impacted the people they were designed to serve. The study determined that random patrol did not suppress crime or affect citizen's feelings of security.<sup>9</sup> The results did not conclude that patrol was not useful, according to former Kansas City Police Chief Joseph McNamara, but that officers could spend their time more effectively.<sup>10</sup> A number of studies since that time have examined the efficacy of what is commonly referred to as the standard or professional model of policing, which consists of random patrol, rapid response to calls for service, and follow-up investigations of all crimes by detectives. In 2004, the National Research Council's Committee to Review Research on Police Policy and Practices examined decades of research and determined that "focused policing" was more effective than the standard model.<sup>11</sup>

Problem-oriented policing (POP), developed in 1990 by Herman Goldstein, is the most widely adopted model of focused policing. Goldstein rejected the idea that the police were merely law enforcement officers for the notion that they played a much more complex role in society. He advocated a new approach to police work emphasizing the ends instead of the means, focused efforts to identify and respond to the underlying causes of crime and disorder instead of just their symptoms, and redefined and expanded the relationship between the police and the community.

POP has been widely acknowledged but unevenly implemented. Nevertheless, POP implementation by police agencies has resulted in successful outcomes. One such example is the Chula Vista, California, Police Department's effort to reduce motel crime and disorder. In that community, the police, in collaboration with other city departments, developed an ordinance that promoted third-party policing by holding motels accountable for excessive service calls. As a result, service calls declined by 45 percent, crime declined by 68 percent, and motels reported increased revenues and an expanded clientele.

Many police agencies, buoyed by federal Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) grants, formed specialized community policing units in lieu of finding ways to distribute new work methods broadly throughout all levels of the department. From 1995 through 1999, federal COPS funding reached its highest levels but since then has decreased dramatically. As a result of reduced funding, many community policing and POP units have been reduced or have disappeared altogether, stalling or reversing the gains acquired through nearly two decades of substantial efforts. Hurdles faced by POP suggest that departments cannot afford another try at implementation during tough fiscal times, but that is not necessarily accurate. Although federal COPS funding has been significantly reduced, there are two relatively simple measures departments can take to integrate POP into routine functions:

1. Establish an in-service community policing training program for officers who have completed the field training officer program and who have some patrol experience, but are still on probationary status. The program, which could be completed in about four weeks, should be based in the patrol division as an extension of the conventional program. Training officers with active caseloads could demonstrate POP techniques and strategies to trainees as they work together on actual projects.
2. Assign police supervisors the responsibility for actively managing POP projects. A clear statement of purpose from the chief or sheriff, hands-on applications in a learning environment, and mentoring and active participation by supervisors will convince officers that POP is an integral component of policing and important to the department.

POP must be generalized and distributed throughout the department if it is to not only survive, but also flourish. Barry Bluestone, director of the Center for Urban and Regional Policy at Northeastern University, argues that the public sector and its unions will have to "improve productivity, improve the services they offer, and find innovative ways to deliver them," or the public will look for better alternatives.<sup>12</sup> If POP were to be incorporated by every officer—magnifying its potential for reducing crime—it is reasonable to say the best POP initiatives remain to be realized.

## Innovate through Collaboration

The High Point, North Carolina, Police Department faced a problem common throughout the nation: An open-air drug market, plagued by violence and prostitution, taking place in a neighborhood full of fearful or resentful residents. Increased enforcement efforts made little, if any, difference. So the police decided to try something new: They asked a professor at John Jay College to examine the situation and offer advice. Local police ended up talking to community leaders, identified the drug dealers with a propensity for violence, and then approached the dealers using a multidisciplinary team to inform them they were being closely monitored and would be vigorously prosecuted if they did not stop their activities. Then the social services representative asked the dealers what they needed to get other jobs. The intervention was not about arrest and prosecution—those were just tools; it was about making the neighborhood livable for its residents, and it worked. Nearly all the dealers complied and residents were satisfied because they felt safer in their neighborhoods and confident that the police were responsive to their problems.<sup>13</sup> The point here is not whether this one particular technique will work

everywhere—it may not—but strategies based on new ideas and approaches hold great promise. The point is that the police can increase their effectiveness through consulting, collaboration, and innovation.

Law enforcement professionals possess a specialized body of knowledge, but there is simply no way any one discipline can access all the ideas and tools that are available. When General David Petraeus was formulating a new strategy for Iraq in 2007, he consulted a “wonky group of PhDs” for advice and assistance.<sup>14</sup> Forming a collaborative relationship with a reputable researcher or academic institution allows the department to assess the efficacy of its crime prevention and enforcement efforts and investigative alternative strategies and brings a fresh set of ideas to the table that might challenge long-held assumptions within the policing industry. Police agencies should no longer be satisfied with models based solely on intuition, anecdote, or received wisdom. Law enforcement and, more importantly, the public will benefit from multidisciplinary problem-solving approaches.

## The Recession Will End

Whenever this recession finally ends, it is unlikely the economy that emerges will be the same as the economy it replaced. An improved economy may relieve some of these pressures, but police officers are generally among the best-paid civil servants, and cities and counties will be cautious of adding locally funded positions.

This article did not address every conceivable strategy that could result in cost savings. Its aim was to provide some ideas to integrate police agencies with the communities they serve, to advocate for an alternative to eliminating COPS, and to suggest a practical program to make better use of whatever resources are left after budgets have been cut.

A police agency that knows what the people it serves want most, how to use its resources most effectively, and is willing to consider new ideas to solve old problems is well positioned to prevent and reduce crime and improve the quality of life in the communities it serves. ?

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup>Police Executive Research Forum, “44 Percent Cite Increases in Crime Due to Economic Crisis: 63 Percent of Local Police Departments Are Facing Cuts in Their Total Funding,” press release, January 27, 2009, [http://policeforum.org/upload/PERF%20Survey%20on%20Policing%20&%20Economy\\_908860847\\_222009153254.pdf](http://policeforum.org/upload/PERF%20Survey%20on%20Policing%20&%20Economy_908860847_222009153254.pdf) (accessed April 2, 2009).

<sup>2</sup>Robert J. Samuelson, “California’s Reckoning—and Ours,” *Washington Post*, August 3, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/08/02/AR2009080201253.html> (accessed March 24, 2010).

<sup>3</sup>Robert C. Trojanowicz and Hazel Harder, *The Status of Contemporary Policing Programs* (East Lansing, Mich.: National Center for Community Policing, 1985), <http://www.cj.msu.edu/~people/cp/status.html> (accessed March 24, 2010).

<sup>4</sup>John H. Campbell, Joseph Brann and David Williams. *Officer-per-thousand formulas & other Policing Myths: A Leadership Model for Better Police Resource Management* (Portland, Oregon: Campbell DeLong Resources, Inc., 2003), 3, <http://www.cdri.com/library/Officer1000FullVer.pdf> (accessed March 24, 2010).

<sup>5</sup>*Santa Cruz County Community Assessment Project Year 15, 2009 Comprehensive Report* (Capitola, California: United Way of Santa Cruz County, 2009), 7, [http://www.appliedsurveyresearch.org/projects/cap/cap2009/CAP15\\_Full\\_Report.pdf](http://www.appliedsurveyresearch.org/projects/cap/cap2009/CAP15_Full_Report.pdf) (accessed March 24, 2010).

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>7</sup>See the Canadian model, "The National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention: Building Safer Communities," <http://www.acsa-caah.ca/Portals/0/Member/PDF/en/documents/nationalstrat.pdf> (accessed December 14, 2009); and the Australian model: "Orange Community Plan 2007-11" <http://www.orange.nsw.gov.au/go/building-our-city/safety-in-our-city/crime-prevention-plan> (accessed December 14, 2009).

<sup>8</sup>Office of the City Auditor, *Report to the City Council City of San Jose: An Audit of the Police Department—Bureau of Field Operations Patrol Division's Staffing and Deployment* (February 2000), 27, <http://www.sanjoseca.gov/auditor/AuditReports/0001/0001report.pdf> (accessed March 24, 2010).

<sup>9</sup>George Kelling et al., *The Kansas City Preventive Patrol Experiment: A Summary Report* (Washington D.C.: Police Foundation, 1974), 34.

<sup>10</sup>Joseph McNamara, personal communication, March 25, 2009.

<sup>11</sup>[sup>](#)Wesley Skogan and Kathleen Frydl, eds., *Fairness and Effectiveness in Policing: The Evidence* (Washington D.C.: National Academies Press, 2004), 4–5.

<sup>12</sup>"Public Sector Unions: Welcome to the Real World," *The Economist* (December 10, 2009): 32.

<sup>13</sup>"Crime and Politics: The Velvet Glove," *The Economist* (October 22, 2009): 33.

<sup>14</sup>Thomas E. Ricks, "The COINdinistas," *Foreign Policy* (December 2009): 63.

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