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Communities as Allies

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A popular axiom attributed to British policing is the police are the public and the public are the police. Inherent in this term is a blurring of the distinction between the police and the public they serve; the police are cast as being little different from the citizenry and citizens are cast into a role of responsibility for the safety and well-being of the community. In effect, communities are framed as allies in the fight to ensure safe and secure neighborhoods. Across space and time this idea has held uneven sway within American policing ideologies. This essay considers the relationship between the police and the policed, as well as how that relationship might be influenced be technological and social evolutions. The essay begins with an overview of the very notion of "community" and their relationship with crime and disorder. This is followed by a brief review of the historical trajectory of police-community interactions within American policing. We then consider how emerging and future technologies might modify what "community" means. The essay concludes with a consideration of police and community interactions and partnerships in the digital age.

Thinking about Community

The term "community" is imbued with both a common understanding and an element of abstract vagueness. Though most readers certainly have a general understanding of what the term means, the exact definition and parameters of community are subject to some debate (see Kappeler & Gaines, 2005, pp. 74-79). The term generally implies a common set of values, beliefs, traditions, and cultures that are shared by a group of people. These concepts of community have largely been spatially based; traditional communities have primarily been place- or geography-based. Depending on idiosyncrasies across different locales, communities may be identified as geographic areas as small as one or two blocks or as large as a neighborhood or cluster of neighborhoods. This traditional identification of a community has long been recognized by law enforcement and other political agencies focused on improving and maintaining public safety. Physical locations have been traditionally divided using a variety of

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methods and boundaries to define the zones of responsibility for layers of service providers (i.e., school districts, election precincts, and first-responding fire services).

Aside from geographic or spatial components, communities can further be defined by shared values systems and the mutual obligations they engender. When these systems are established, individuals within the community develop a sense of their mutual identity and shared interests. The degree of shared interests and identities helps to understand the degree of embeddedness of individuals associated with given communities. The more deeply embedded and committed the individual, the more they would be expected to share values, beliefs, and bonds with others (see also Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Sampson, 1999). Consequently, embedded individuals are expected to be more active participants in their community; they are further expected to make more efforts to contribute to the well-being of their community, presumably to more successful ends. These individuals may participate in a number of ways, such as through church activities and stewardship, local school functions, neighborhood associations, or simply informal interpersonal relationships between the people within the community. It is widely accepted that a greater sense of community leads to more effective regulation of local conditions due to an increased propensity of residents to take action to collectively enforce normative expectations (see Bursik & Grasmick, 1993). Although any given community as a whole can hold any number of values, communal safety is often a leading priority. For example, proponents of community policing argue this approach to policing fosters strong ties among residents of an area, making them more effective in reducing crime and improving quality of life (Kappeler & Gaines, 2005).

A strong sense of community, that is a collection of individuals with a shared identity and sense of collective concern and action, can be one of the most salient factors affecting the overall "health" of a community (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990). If a community can develop these shared value systems and mutual obligations, social bonds between residents often increase and informal social control is heightened. Leung (2005), for example, argues that focused "community building" strategies in low-income housing can increase the sense of collective ownership and responsibility, thereby decreasing levels of disorder. In this case, high levels of collective efficacy, defined by Sampson and Raudenbush (1999) as the cohesion amongst individuals within the community along with shared expectations associated with keeping public space within the community safe, are often found. Measures of collective efficacy, a sense of

one's community and involvement in local institutions, such as churches, have all been associated with lower rates of crime and violence (Cancino, Varano, & Schafer, 2007; Cantillon, Davidson, & Schweitzer, 2003; Johnson, Jang, Li, & Larson, 2000; Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999). Communities with high levels of collective efficacy demonstrate high degrees of self-regulation in terms of controlling the behavior of their residents through informal social control. Additionally, these established and organized communities may also have the ability to gain assistance from outside, formal sources of social control (e.g., law enforcement) in order to increase internal regulation or keep unwanted elements, such as drug dealers and gang members, out of their community (Warner, 2007).

Social science research offers reasonable support linking the strength of communities with local social conditions. Community cohesion and stability are found to correlate with local levels of crime and disorder. Whether such cohesion and stability can be influenced and enhanced is not currently understood. In addition, though advocates of community policing argue that police and community efforts can enhance community and lead to more effective and self-regulating neighborhoods, the exact functioning of these processes remains unclear. Given that communities have a capacity to influence crime it makes sense to seek ways to enhance the integrity of communities and to ensure some level of citizen involvement in policing. These ideas, however, have only recently entered into the discourse surrounding American policing.

The History of Police-Community Partnerships

Scholars regularly refer to different "eras" of policing in an effort to trace law enforcement organizations from their earliest days as chaotic and informal organizations to the highly rationalized bureaucracies that exist today. These scholars tend to refer to the "Political Era" of policing as covering the years 1840-1930, the "Professional" or "Reform Era" of policing as covering the years 1930-1970, and the "Community Policing Era" as covering the years 1970 to the present day. This framework is particularly valuable because it helps to explain not only the formal structure of police organizations, but also to identify shifts in emergent organizational structures and strategies. The shifting nature of police-community partnerships over time is but one important dimension to these changes.

The earliest days of modern policing were founded on a strong tradition of partnerships, formal or informal, between police and the communities they served. With the advent of formal

law enforcement organizations in the mid-nineteenth century, police officers were historically selected from and ultimately assigned to the very neighborhoods in which they lived. Police officers were in many ways, part and parcel of their home communities. Their professional careers became somewhat of an extension of their personal lives. Police officers usually began their careers with well-developed personal networks that were only further enhanced during early days on the job. With little-to-no direct supervision, backup, or capacity to be in regular contact with "headquarters," the abilities of officers to develop formal and informal relationships was critical to the job. These relationships were best characterized as officer-level craft that was generally the product of individual officers forming relationships or partnerships with individual citizens or groups of citizens. There is little evidence of systematic organizational efforts to develop large-scale community partnerships. Regardless, similar to today, well-developed relationships with neighborhood constituencies were essential to gaining intelligence, solving crimes, and ensuring physical safety for officers (Uchida, 2010).

While the advantages of highly developed networks of personal relationships can seem obvious, the negative consequences also emerged as officers arguably became too deeply and personally embedded with the very community they were responsible for policing. Corruption, for example, materialized as a central concern as officers at all levels were argued to be too closely connected to local political machines and criminal enterprises. The police, it was observed, became the "muscle" of politicians seeking to gain and maintain political support (Uchida, 2010). In the end, many police organizations developed an organizational ethos of corruption that became the primary target for police reformers during the early twentieth century.

Reformers pushed for more "professional" police forces characterized by highly qualified candidates, formalized training standards, integration of technology, and the decoupling of police from local political influences. As a way of reducing corruption and political influences, this new generation of police executives implemented intentional strategies to depersonalize policing. Many departments implemented strategies such as altering the locations of patrol assignments and assigning officers to beats where they had little familiarity with residents and networks. These strategies were intended to eliminate the potential corruptive influences of close personal relationships between police and the community. Moreover, the introduction of motorized patrol also created greater physical, and thus interpersonal, distance between officers and their communities.

The reform efforts of the early twentieth century were seen by and large as effective in instituting the basic agenda of the reform movement. Civil service exams were implemented to institute a level of objectivity in candidate selection, formal training curricula were adopted across the nation, patrol strategies were developed to regularly move officers around a community, and police departments exploited the capacities of technology. These strategies were effective in reducing the appearance of large-scale corruption within policing. The intentional movement away from close police-citizen relationships, while potentially effective in reducing levels of corruption had the negative consequence of reducing the legitimacy of the police among many segments of the community and vice versa. The legitimacy of the police was raised most vocally during the 1960s as some citizens conceived of their local police as nothing more than external, occupying forces less intent on providing services to the community and more intent on exercising their authority. It was during this period that the basic tenets of community policing were seeded.

Community policing is best described as an organizational philosophy couched in the principles of crime prevention through problem-solving and community partnerships. After recognizing the limitations to the professional model of policing, many police executives deliberately rejected the idea that they alone were responsible for reducing crime and that the most effective strategies for enhancing public safety require formalized relationships outside law enforcement organizations. Community policing is based on the concept of making the necessary organizational changes that facilitate innovative responses to crime. The role of police, for example, has evolved to reflect moving beyond merely *reacting* to crime after is has occurred to proactive strategies geared toward the prevention of crime. Within the community policing model, the concept of "partnerships" has emerged as one of the primary organizing themes. "Partnership" connotes a deliberative engagement of external (and internal) constituencies in meaningful ways organized around the principles of preventing and solving crime. This represents a profound departure from the "professional era" where police placed themselves in the role of "all-knowing-expert" exclusively charged with the crime control function.

The advent of community policing and similar organizational mandates has created an environment where police organizations actively engage and partner with a variety of public and private citizens and organizations as central aspects of their overall organizational efforts. The

concept of partnerships has evolved over the history of policing; though originally of little concern, in the last forty years community partnership, trust, cooperation, and confidence have become central elements (at least rhetorically) in American policing. Though some might argue the philosophy of community policing is waning (or was never fully realized), policing concerns over community and partnership seem quite likely to endure for the foreseeable future. Setting aside the inconclusive evidence regarding the capacity of the police to enhance community and thus, indirectly, influence crime, agencies must fulfill a political mandate and social expectations that they will network and partner with the community or communities they serve.

Are Conceptions of Community Changing?

As stated earlier in this essay, throughout human history "community" has been a concept tied almost exclusively to place and time. That is, an individual's feeling of belonging to a collective or group was tied to physically interacting with other likeminded individuals; neighbors conversed over the back fence, religious adherents worshipped together, or sports fans watched events with one another. Though 20th century technological expansions such as the telephone, radio, and television may have subtly modified some dimensions of community, the spatial and temporal components remained quite strong. An open question being considered by futurists and social scientists, among others, is whether the social networking capabilities facilitated by the internet and modern computer applications might have more radical influences on the spatial and temporal nature of "community." Further, if changes in the conception and function of community do emerge, what implications might those evolutions have upon the nature of communities as allies for the police?

Social networking sites combine the speed of contemporary communication networks with the "high tech, high touch" feel of software and computer applications. In reality this discussion can be traced back to the 1970s and the establishment of ARPANET, the precursor of the internet. ARPANET was established to create asynchronous linkages of like-minded, but geographical diffuse scholars. The modern internet (sometimes referred to as "web 2.0") brings that objective to life for the average consumer. It is a transition that has been radically fast, yet which many have not noticed.

First e-mail allowed users to quickly send messages. Later the internet allowed producers and consumers of information to find each other (aided with the emergence of more sophisticated

search applications from Alta Vista and Yahoo! to Google). Now, social networking sites (MySpace and Facebook being but two of the more common contemporary examples) allow users to locate long-lost friends and to make new acquaintances with common interests. Online virtual worlds create alternative platforms in which users can express themselves (Second Life) and/or engage in recreation (World of Warcraft or Medal of Honor). Enhanced digital phones and wireless computer networks allow consumers to track new posts to their favorite blogs and "tweets". Consumers equipped with the proper technology can take their "community" with them anywhere they might wish to go, at any time they wish.

Though many individuals may still prefer to derive their sense of community, identify, and belonging from those with whom they temporally and spatially interact, that is no longer required. If a person's social interaction and sense of community is grounded in virtual worlds and social networks of friends around the world, do they maintain the same sense of loyalty, allegiance, and concerns for the physical community in which they live, work, and traverse on a daily basis? Are relations with neighbors important when one has hundreds of online friends? Is it important to attend religious ceremonies or sporting events when one can engage in those same practices in virtual environments? In an era when "telecommuting" and working from one's residence is increasingly pervasive, is one's sense of identify and basis of socialization as strong when co-workers are never together in place and time? Such questions are difficult to address and their answers are likely embedded in the preferences, habits, and economic situation of the individual. Nonetheless, these questions lead to further considerations of importance and relevance to the future of policing.

Community policing is predicated on temporal and spatial interaction of citizens who share a common community identity. What happens to the ability of the police to leverage local citizens when ties to a geographic community are weakened? Though most citizens will still maintain some semblance of commitment to the physical environment in which they live and work, what will police agencies have to do in order to compete for the limited attention and energy citizens might expend? These are fundamental questions that need to be of greater prominence in modern discourse about police efforts to engage and strengthen communities, regardless of the form and function of the latter. To be sure, the answers may not be easily identified; the processes agencies employ will likely have to go beyond the current "best practices" touted in popular and professional media. Agencies will need to do more than

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establish Twitter feeds and create a presence in Second Life, but the actions necessary to ensure viability in the digital age are not yet readily apparent.

In a similar vein are questions about the nature of policing in online environments. It is still unclear how normative rules of social interaction will ultimately be determined and enforced within social networks; it is likely that variation will emerge, just as we see variation in expected behavior and the repercussions associated with non-conformity in physical communities. We already see examples of universal rules for expected behavior, as well as community-specific lexicon, standards, and modes of punishment. Some sanctions issued for violations of social norms are highly formalized and visible (SecondLife publicizes sanctions issued to users who violate certain terms of service, harkening back to the days of "police blotters" published in local papers), while other sanctions are handled through ad hoc vigilante action. How will the responsibility of "policing" online communities and user conduct ultimately be allocated? What tasks and expectations will be placed upon users, service providers, conventional police organizations, and quasi-police entities that might still emerge?[41]

Community Engagement and Partnerships in the Digital Age

The preceding discussion is intended to provide a history of policy/community partnerships as well as illicit questions about the ways in which police departments can engage and partner with their community in light of advancing digital communication technologies. The authors would contend a clear implication for policing is to capitalize on the use of technology to reach the public. While emerging communication technologies and their associated social trends have transformed community and interaction, they also create opportunities for agencies to capitalize on these applications. Even better, many of these opportunities require little more than modest investments of personnel and time, producing negligible costs for agencies.

For the most part, agencies are mired the tendency to only adopt technologies after consumers have begun to move on to the "next big thing" or agencies have used technologies for narrow purposes. Though many state and local agencies now operate websites, most are static creations reflecting Web 1.0 orientations (i.e., limited use of multimedia and real-time access to information). When agencies operate on MySpace or Facebook, it often seems a tool used to vet

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[41] Examples of the latter have existed since the early days of the internet in the form of groups created to track and, in some cases, respond to distasteful, disorderly, discourteous, and unlawful actions.

the background of prospective employees, rather than also being a method to access consumers via the technologies they most-often utilize. Though a smattering of agencies use blogs, Twitter, text-message communication (operating in both directions), and social networking applications to communicate with the public, the authors would speculate these practices are the exception and not the rule.

This is not to say improvements have not been achieved. One of the side-effects of the tragic shooting events at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University has been an up-swing in text-based mass notification systems. Though the dialog generally only works in one direction (from the police to the public), such systems create a capacity for campus agencies to communicate emergency weather, accident, and crime information to students, faculty, staff, and local residents. Whether consumers will continue to voluntarily enroll in such systems has yet to be seen. It is also unknown whether agencies will use this communication shift to generate momentum toward other types of non-audio two-way communication (i.e., the capacity for users to send a text message to communications personnel alerting them of emergencies or other police concerns).

In the physical world, the relationships between communities and local rates of crime and disorder have been repeatedly validated by the research community. Whether those relationships perpetuate within digital communities is an unresolved question. Police agencies and leaders need to be aware of how emergent technologies create new opportunities for the police and the public to interact, exchange information, and facilitate greater levels of trust and collaboration. At the same time, we need awareness that such technologies generate a number of questions regarding whether the community-crime nexus will persist and, if so, how police organizations ought to position themselves to be more responsive and effective in maximizing communities as allies.

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