

# Community Policing Can Mean Dialog Instead of Rioting

*In broad strokes, community policing suggests the best way to cool down a hot neighborhood is by building lines of communication between citizens and cops.*

BY ADAM STONE / MAY 4, 2017



In Menlo Park, Calif., the Bel Air neighborhood wasn't a place you'd want to take your kids.

“We had murders, shootings. Drive-bys were common. The area was rife with gangs, drugs and guns,” said Police Commander Dave Bertini. Conventional policing wasn't working. “We responded to calls, tried to make as many arrests as possible. We executed dozens and dozens of search warrants to try to break up these gangs. That didn't solve it.”

The department pivoted toward community policing. Cops got out of their cars and started walking the beat. Line officers sat in on town hall meetings. The department opened a new substation where residents are welcome to drop in and get to know the officers. There hasn't been a gang-related shooting since 2013 and violent crime is down by half. “Residents walk their dogs at night, they go out,” Bertini said. “The fear that used to be palpable no longer exists.”

In broad strokes, community policing suggests the best way to cool down a hot neighborhood is by building lines of communication

between citizens and cops. Get cops out of their cars. Invite community input. Build trust so that citizens and police feel like they are on the same team.

The federal government has been backing this play. Since 1995, the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services has invested more than \$12 billion to encourage community policing nationwide, with about half those funds going to smaller cities, towns and counties. Police are buying in: The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports about 70 percent of local police departments include community policing in their mission statement. That includes nine out of 10 departments serving populations of 25,000 or more.

In August 2016, Mayor Bill de Blasio expanded New York City's neighborhood policing program. "In times like these, we have a responsibility to provide our nation with a model for respectful and compassionate neighborhood policing," he said. "If we want to keep all New Yorkers safe, policing must be of, and for, and by the people."

The International Association of Chiefs of Police hails community policing in glowing terms. "No single factor has been more crucial to reducing crime levels than the partnership between law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve. In order for law enforcement to be truly effective, police agencies cannot operate alone; they must have the active support and assistance of citizens and communities," the association declares.

Community policing has its detractors. The civil rights activist group ANSWER (Act Now to Stop War and End Racism) alleges that the practice leads to "the vast overpolicing of communities" especially among poorer neighborhoods where resources would be better spent on nutrition and jobs programs. For the majority in law enforcement, however, community policing increasingly seems like a means to safeguard communities while also easing the tensions

that put officers at risk.

### **A different approach**

Sarasota, Fla., made a big push for community policing when Bernadette DiPino came aboard as chief in 2012. DiPino describes it as a philosophy, a way of thinking that's integrated into every aspect of the department's work.

At the same time, community policing came to Sarasota in some very tangible ways, starting with an effort to curb activity at a prostitution hotspot. The state Legislature wanted to take a law-and-order approach — it was planning to fine Johns \$5,000, while the women involved risked being branded as felons after three arrests. But the chief put a different idea on the table.

Now when officers believe a woman is soliciting, they come to her aid. “We help connect people to resources and programs, to get them the help they need, whether it is for drug problems, alcohol abuse, mental health issues, economic problems,” DiPino said. “Most of these women are battered and we can connect them with those kinds of resources, as well as with resources around human trafficking, so they are no longer in the life.”

A citizens' police academy meets twice a year, giving locals the chance to ride along, shoot firearms and experience the city firsthand from the officer's point of view. “It helps people understand what we do, and it's also helpful for the police officer,” DiPino said. “We tend to think that everybody in the community is a bad guy, since that is who we deal with, and this exposes them to more and different kinds of people throughout the community.”

An occasional “coffee with the cops” brings citizens in to chat with officers informally at the local doughnut shop or coffee bar. “It creates a casual, social way for police and citizens to engage in

conversation. There's no specific agenda. It is very non-threatening," she said.

Cops on the beat are required to be out of their cars for an hour a day. "They can go into businesses, they can be walking around," DiPino said. "We ask them to get out and engage with the community as best they can."

The net result of all these efforts? The department doesn't claim that crime is down, but the tenor of the situation has changed. Instead of calling to complain about how police behave, neighbors these days are far more likely to complain about noise or other local problems. In fact, last year internal complaints about cops exceeded external complaints. "That's what I want as chief," DiPino said. "I want my people inside to recognize what could potentially be wrong and handle it internally, rather than hearing about it from the community."

### **Ways to reconnect**

The Tucson, Ariz., Police Department has implemented various aspects of community policing for years, but when Police Chief Chris Magnus arrived from Richmond, Calif., in 2016, he turned up the heat. "He has challenged us to think of ways to reconnect with the community that we have not done in the past," said Assistant Chief Kevin Hall.

This meant the Midtown Division would take a fresh look at its relations with the large community of resettled Central African refugees. "When the chief asked us to re-engage with communities where we are maybe on the fringe, that department started a program where every Saturday morning the officers would go out with donated books, lay a blanket on the ground and read to the kids," Hall said.

It took a couple of months to build a following, but soon there were dozens of kids coming out to these impromptu events. Officers also have scheduled times when they drop by the local Boys and Girls Club to engage the kids in homework, sports and crafts.

The change in mood is tangible. “It used to be when parents saw a patrol car at the club house they called the director to find out what was wrong,” Hall said. “Now they come over to take pictures with ‘our officers.’ The hope is that, for the kids, this feeling and this relationship will carry forward into their adult lives.”

Community policing extends not just to young people but also to the adults, for example through a “business watch” modeled after a neighborhood watch program. “We have foot patrol officers speaking to each and every business, handing out their card and their cellphone numbers, explaining to the business owners that we are all in this together, that we need to look out for each other,” Hall said.

While these kinds of activities are easy enough to describe, they are not always so simple to implement. The community typically has been responsive to the department’s overtures, but it can be challenging sometimes to get police officers on board with these practices.

“There’s a culture shift from just responding to the next call versus stopping on the way and actually getting out of your car and chatting with people,” Hall said. When officers do have trouble making the mental shift, it’s most often the community feedback that helps bring them around.

“The community has responded very positively to this. People write letters, they call in, they praise our officers at public forums for engaging and being active,” Hall said. “The other officers see that, and that has been the No. 1 motivator for a lot of officers to gravitate toward this model.”

Getting that officer buy-in is critical to the success of any community policing effort, said Jack Rinchich, president of the National Association of Chiefs of Police. “It’s pretty simple, but it has to be a genuine approach. If it is perfunctory, people know. They will frown upon your efforts if you try to manufacture something that isn’t real,” he said.

### **Bottom-up approach**

In Menlo Park, one way the department drives that sense of authentic engagement is by encouraging police officers to help set the agenda. When department leaders sought to pick up the pace on community policing, they turned to the line officers to ask how it might best be accomplished.

“When we had all our gang murders and shootouts with the police, it was the officers who said we should be more active in community meetings,” Bertini said. “It was the officers who asked for a new substation that was more inviting, that would be a place where people could feel that they could come in and feel welcome.”

Officers have implemented a range of other hands-on efforts to build bridges. If there’s a block party going on, an officer will likely drop by. One officer started a wrestling team for kids in a disadvantaged neighborhood. When there was a rash of local burglaries, cops on the beat took part in a town hall meeting to strategize potential solutions. A Chief’s Advisory Board invites input from neighborhood and business representatives.

“We want our frontline-level officers involved in these things, not just us on the command staff,” Bertini said.

Even with all these efforts in the works, people still complain about racial profiling here; for some, the badge still engenders a level of distrust. “It is too simplistic to say that community policing makes that go away, but what it does do is it gives us the conduit to talk

about it openly and honestly so that it doesn't boil over into rioting and people shooting at cops," Bertini said. "If these open lines of communication exist, we can use those lines to address those issues. Maybe not everybody will be happy at the end, but at least we are airing things."

But community policing is about more than just talking. Proponents say it can yield tangible outcomes, especially if it is tied to data. For departments to shift toward community policing without straining already-overburdened resources, leaders need to shape these efforts based on facts on the ground.

"Where is the problem occurring? When does it occur? You need to accurately know what is going on in your community," said David Dial, who after a 45-year career in law enforcement became director of the Criminal Justice program at Aurora University in Illinois in 2012.

To conserve resources and still engage a broad swatch of the community, "you need to get some data," he said. Solid information will help departments target their efforts, while ensuring those efforts are grounded in reality. "If the issue is about trust and respect, the community is not going to talk to you if they think you don't know what is going on."

It's equally important to ground the effort in the practical. Some departments have been disappointed in the outcomes of community policing efforts that amount to little more than an instruction to "get out and walk around." To be effective, these efforts need to be more concrete, Dial said.

"Give people goals and objectives," he said. "Maybe the task is to identify one problem on your beat and over the next six months try to fix that problem."

Tangible goals and measurable outcomes are keys to success. DiPino incorporates community policing wins into her department's awards and recognitions and — key to the effort — she makes it a part of every officer's evaluation. "If they want to get promoted, they need to buy into this," she said.

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