Community Policing is Not Soft on Crime: The Evidence

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Dolan Consulting Group is committed to the principles of community-oriented policing. Unfortunately, we sometimes encounter push back from attendees in our courses that suggest community-oriented policing strategies are some form of a "hug-a-thug" philosophy that is soft on crime and criminals. We are often baffled when we encounter such views as we struggle to understand how community-oriented policing strategies, designed to include law abiding citizen input to determine crime priorities and responses, could be considered soft on crime.

The community-oriented policing strategies we advocate focus on the targeting of crime and criminals. These strategies involve officers getting out of their patrol cars and actively engaging the community in a way that builds relationships that lead to intelligence-gathering and crime prevention and prosecution. Including citizens in the processes of alerting the police about crime and identifying criminals is designed to lead to the successful prevention and prosecution of criminals preying upon communities.

Dr. Robert Trojanowicz, one of the founders of modern community-oriented policing, defined it this way:

Community Policing is a philosophy of policing, based on the concept that police officers and private citizens working together in creative ways can help solve contemporary community problems related to crime, fear of crime, social and physical disorder, and neighborhood decay. The philosophy is predicated on the belief that achieving these goals requires that police departments develop a new relationship with the law-abiding people in the community, allowing them a greater voice in setting local priorities, and involving them in efforts to improve the overall quality of life in their neighborhoods. It shifts the focus of police work from handling random calls to solving problems.[1]

How is that soft on crime? **A careful examination of American policing prior to the 1950s will reveal that this "community policing" is what regular policing was like in both rural and**

urban environments for decades. And yet it is hard to imagine, for all the imperfections of policing in the early 20ᵗʰ Century, criticizing police officers of that era as being soft on crime.

A research study has just been published that provides strong evidence that community policing is not soft on crime but actually leads to higher arrest rates for violent crimes. In May of this year, the research journal *Justice Quarterly* published a study by Dr. Rob Tillyer of the University of Texas at San Antonio. This study examined violent crime arrest rates across a nationwide sample of 603 law enforcement agencies.[2] Professor Tillyer specifically looked at 402,786 reports of violent crimes across these 603 jurisdictions to determine the percentage of these cases that were cleared by an arrest. He examined whether or not agencies engaged in community-oriented policing had lower arrest rates.

Professor Tillyer measured each agency's level of community-oriented policing (COP) activity as the total number of community policing tactics / policies the agency employed. These tactics / policies included COP as part of the agency's mission statement, a formal COP unit, use of the SARA problem solving process by patrol officers, a written COP plan, development of formal partnerships with the community, conducted community surveys, and used of technology in the COP process. Some agencies in the study had none of these COP tactics / policies, and a few engaged in all of them. The average agency employed between two and three of these policies / tactics.[3]

After accounting for the influences of situational characteristics (i.e., crime type, victim characteristics, witnesses present, etc.), and organizational characteristics (i.e., agency size, crime rate, call for service workload, etc.), **the study revealed that agencies that engage in community-oriented policing had slightly _higher_ overall arrest rates than did agencies that engaged in none of the stated COP activities. In fact, the more COP tactics / policies an agency had, the _higher_ its overall arrest rate for violent crimes**. Each additional COP tactic or policy increased the agency's arrest rate, but the greatest arrest rate increases—the biggest bang for the buck—resulted from having COP as part of the agency mission statement, and having formal partnerships with the community.[4]

This wide-reaching, rigorous study is just one more piece of research evidence supporting the importance of community-oriented policing. In earlier research briefs we have cited research articles that analyzed numerous published studies of community-oriented policing strategies. These studies revealed overwhelming evidence that some community policing tactics (neighborhood substations, general community meetings, problem-solving community meetings, foot patrols, and intentional informal face-to-face police-citizen contacts) consistently reduce fear of crime and increase confidence / satisfaction with the police.[5]

All these tactics share one thing in common: face-to-face contact between law enforcement officers and law-abiding citizens within neighborhoods of greatest need. This can be achieved through the daily and intentional of out-of-car experiences with law-abiding citizens by all in law enforcement. **The available evidence demonstrates that community-oriented policing can clearly bridge the gap between the police and law-abiding citizens while still holding offenders accountable for criminal activity**.

In fact, the available evidence shows that *community-oriented policing is tough on crime*—leading to more arrests as officers increase their "out of car experiences" to build relationships, gather intelligence and successfully apprehend the criminals preying upon the community.

References

[1] Trojanowicz, R., & Bucqueroux, B. (1990). *Community Policing: A Contemporary Perspective*. Cincinnati, OH: Anderson Press, Page 5.

[2] Tillyer, R. (2017). Assessing the impact of community-oriented policing on arrest. *Justice Quarterly*. Volume and issue forthcoming. This article can be downloaded at: http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/07418825.2017.1327609

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Weisburd, D., & Eck, J. E. (2004). What can police do to reduce crime, disorder, and fear? *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 593(1)*, 42-64; Zhao, J. S., Schneider, M., & Thurman, Q. (2002). The effect of police presence on public fear reduction and satisfaction: a review of the literature. *The Justice Professional, 15(3)*, 273-299.