Community Oriented Policing in Minneapolis

by William J. Craig

Community oriented policing is becoming an important way to keep cities livable. The Minneapolis Police Department has used special programs that are community oriented for some time, but in 1991 it made a decision to change the way all officers did business. They began with a pilot effort in the Fifth Precinct (see map). CURA helped conduct a pair of surveys measuring the impact community oriented policing had on citizen relations with the police. The surveys were sponsored jointly by CURA and the Minneapolis Police Department.

What is Community Oriented Policing?
Calls for police had risen over the past decade, to the point where the police were in a purely reactive mode. Instead of trying to understand the problem and correct it at its root, officers were simply going to a site, taking a statement, then wrapping things up as quickly as possible so they would be ready to respond to the next call. Enforcement was the name of the game, with all resources focused on the troublemakers.

In community oriented policing (COP) officers try to get ahead of problems by paying more attention to what is going on in the community and working more closely with the local, solid citizens. From neighborhood to neighborhood the issues change and the response will change as well. The Minneapolis Police Department developed the following definition of community oriented policing:

Community oriented policing involves police officers and citizens working together in creative ways to help solve problems related to crime, fear of crime, neighborhood deterioration and social disorder. It allows citizens a greater voice in setting priorities and involves them in efforts to improve the overall quality of life in their neighborhoods. It shifts the focus of police to longer term problem solving, building a partnership with citizens and promoting quality follow-through, while maintaining emphasis on fair and impartial enforcement of the law.

What does this mean in day-to-day terms? It means police officers spend more time trying to understand the basic concerns of the neighborhood, perhaps through regular attendance at meetings of a neighborhood association or by stopping to talk with people on the street. It means doing follow-up work with the victim of a crime; going back several days after the incident to see how the victim is coping, perhaps referring him or her to community resources, and seeking additional information that may help solve the case. It means looking for patterns of crime and working to head off future incidents.

A good example of community oriented policing was the Squad 587 project in the Whittier Neighborhood. The neighborhood association, the Whittier Alliance, identified a major drug problem in the south-central part of the neighborhood. The commander of the Fifth Precinct spent an evening in the home of an elderly couple, watching and learning how intolerable the situation had become. A plan of action was developed that included assigning certain officers on each shift to walk and patrol the area. A letter explaining the situation and asking for citizen cooperation was co-signed by the police commander and the anti-crime program director of the Whittier Alliance and hand delivered by officers to all residents of the area. Starting in February 1992, 355 arrests were made by the officers of Squad 587. By the end of March incidents had dropped dramatically and they remain low.

The pilot program to expand community oriented policing to all officers in the Fifth Precinct was implemented in the summer of 1991. First came a two day in-service training program which gave officers the rationale for COP. It described various ways to implement the program, taught officers about what community resources are available for referral, and ended with extensive role playing. As one supervisor stated, “Some [officers] take it to like a duck to water; others have to be encouraged to do more than anonymously respond to 911 calls.”

The First Survey—Before COP
Before implementing community oriented policing, the Minneapolis Police Department contacted CURA about a community survey in the Fifth Precinct. The survey asked people to prioritize crime problems in their area to help direct policing efforts. But it also asked them how satisfied they were with the police at that time, before the pilot project began. The survey provided a benchmark against which change could be measured.

CURA’s Minnesota Center for Survey Research provided technical assistance for the survey that was conducted in May, June, and July of 1991. Some 409 telephone surveys were completed, using random digit dialing to reach households and another randomizing technique to identify which adult in the household should respond. The survey response rate was 71 percent. Surveys of this size have a sampling error of no more than five percentage points (plus or minus) in 95 of 100 cases.

Police were pleasantly surprised with the level of satisfaction with their work in the Fifth Precinct. Nearly three quarters rated their performance as good (61 percent) or excellent (11 percent). This left little room for improvement, even if COP proved to be a wonderful innovation. But as one official said, “There is plenty room to lose ground,” and with increasing concern over crime, a good reason to lose it.
Part of community-oriented policing is taking the time to understand the basic concerns of the people in the neighborhood.

The survey asked what people would "like to see the Police Department do differently to make Minneapolis a better place to live?" Three-quarters identified some important area for improvement, but less than a third of these areas had anything to do with increased law enforcement. More suggestions had to do with community relations. People suggested, for example, that the police "get more involved with the community," "have more foot patrols," and "treat all people equally." Clearly, people were interested in exactly the type of change that community-oriented policing would bring.

A separate set of questions asked about personal contacts with the police during the past two years. Nearly half had had personal contact and over two-thirds of these people had talked face-to-face with a police officer. Over one-quarter (28 percent) said the contact was "very positive" and another 51 percent said it was "positive." Seven of eight (87 percent) said the person they talked with was "professional." Two thirds (66 percent) felt the person was concerned about their situation. And two thirds were either "very satisfied" (38 percent) or "somewhat satisfied" (32 percent) with the way their situation was resolved. Half (51 percent) could think of no better way that the situation could have been handled.

Taken as a whole, the overwhelming majority of the people that were interviewed (79 percent) felt their community was a safe place to live. They were given a list of sixteen problems and asked to identify those that they considered a major problem. None were considered a major problem by a majority of the residents and only two were listed as "major" by more than a quarter: "cars speeding and not obeying traffic signs" (28 percent) and "people taking things from yards, garages, or cars" (27 percent). The third ranked problem, "people breaking in or stealing into homes to steal," was considered major by 24 percent.

But what was considered a problem varied across the precinct. In the poorer, east section of the precinct, people had higher levels of concern for nearly every type of problem. People in the south section had lower levels of concern for nearly every problem. And people in the north were in between. In several cases, the ranking of problems changed from one section of the precinct to the next. In the east, "people selling or using drugs" was ranked fourth, with 25 percent listing it as a major problem. But drugs were ranked no higher than ninth anywhere else. The third ranked problem overall, breaking in, was the first ranked problem in the south (26 percent). And "groups of teenagers hanging around or causing trouble" was ranked fourth in the north, but no higher than eighth in the other areas. It is exactly this variability that begs for the police to focus their efforts by responding differently in different communities.

The Community Response After Two Years of COP

Two years later, the Minnesota Center for Survey Research conducted the same survey in a follow up with 401 adults across the precinct. By then technology had advanced so the interviewer was prompted to ask questions and record answers with the assistance of a computer. The second survey was conducted in April and May of 1993; it had an 83 percent response rate.

The survey results need to be seen in the context of actual levels of crime. Using data from the Crime Analysis Unit of the Minneapolis Police Department, we looked at police reports for fourteen types of crime, a mix of more serious and less serious crimes. We obtained data for the same three month period, February through April, in 1991 (before COP started) and again in 1993. During that two year period reported crime dropped 8 percent in the Fifth Precinct, from 3,183 cases to 2,929 cases. Crime also dropped nearly 7 percent for the city as a whole during the same period. In the Fifth Precinct the only increase was in reports of narcotics and domestic assaults.

While most crime reports result from civilian calls to the police, narcotics reports usually come from increased police activity.

When people were asked about how satisfied they were with the police in 1993, their attitudes seemed to be about the same as two years earlier. In some cases they were more satisfied (Table 1). Substantial improvement was recorded in police concern for citizens and their handling of

| Table 1. Questions About Satisfaction with the Police Department (in percents) |
|------------------------------------------|---------|---------|
| 1991 | 1993 |
| Good or excellent rating of department's performance | 72 | 73 |
| Any contact with police within the past two years? | 48 | 47 |
| Was contact positive or very positive? | 79 | 81 |
| Was the police employee professional? | 87 | 88 |
| Did the employee seem concerned about you and your situation? | 66 | 72 |
| Was the situation resolved satisfactorily or very satisfactorily? | 70 | 76 |
| Could think of no way to improve handling of situation | 51 | 55 |
individual situations. This was especially gratifying because the Rodney King trials in Los Angeles were, at the same time as the second survey, proving that not all police are nice.

In the poorer, high minority section of the precinct—the east region—people rated police performance lower. But even there, 67 percent rated performance as either good or excellent. This rating was a drop from 70 percent two years before* in the other areas of the precinct the ratings had risen over the two year period. On the other hand, those people in the east who had spoken with the police rated them higher across the board, than they had been rated two years earlier. For example, in 1993, 83 percent thought the contact was positive or very positive; in 1991, only 77 percent felt this way. In the part of the city where police are most likely to be seen as being in tension with the citizens, their individual performance seems to be appreciated more than ever.

Major Problems Facing Neighborhoods

In the second survey, people were again asked if they felt the “community within a couple blocks of where [they] live is a safe place to live?” Their answers showed that most still felt their neighborhood to be safe, but compared with two years earlier, the percentage who felt it safe had dropped slightly (from 79 to 77 percent).

The survey presented a list of sixteen problems and asked people to identify those that they considered a major problem (Table 2).** During the two year period, the level of severity of all but five of the sixteen problems increased, but three of the five exceptions were the top three problems listed as of most concern two years earlier. Concern over speeding cars, people throwing things, and break-ins were still relatively high, but this is where the police knew they should be concentrating their energy, and they seemed to have made some progress in the areas that most bothered citizens.

The signs of deterioration on so many issues should be read with caution. In many places, when citizens begin to see action taken on their complaints, they become more vocal. They ask for even more improvement. And, of course, the media plays a large role in building public fear about crime. Despite the fact that crime rates are down, concern is up. Maybe television is too graphic. Maybe it’s the more random nature of today’s crime that inflames our fear.

The second survey again showed that problems vary in different parts of the precinct. Concern for nearly every problem in the southern area was lower than in the east and north. It had been lower in the 1991 survey and in 1993, it dropped even further.

In the east, problem rates remained higher than in the other two areas on every issue. Rates of concern increased for twelve of the sixteen issues and stayed the same for three. By 1993, ten of the sixteen issues were seen as major problems by 20 percent or more of the people living in the east; four issues by over 30 percent or more. Rape was the number one issue (45 percent), drugs were second (38 percent), followed by trash (32 percent) and break-ins (32 percent).

This deterioration in the eastern part of the precinct masks improvement on issues of high concern. To be sure, only one of the sixteen areas showed a decrease in concern, but this issue was speeding cars—the issue rated first in 1991. Concern over speeding cars dropped dramatically (from 33 percent to 28 percent in 1993). The second issue for the eastern district in 1991 had been petty theft from yards, garages, and cars. There was no growth in the per-

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* The reader is reminded that, with a sampling error of plus or minus 5 percentage points, this change is not statistically significant.

** Attention must be called to the significant rise in concern about rape—from 16 to 38 percent. During this period a serial rapist was terrorizing women in the western metropolitan area. A suspect was later apprehended by the Minneapolis Police.

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When police work with citizens creative solutions to problems may evolve and citizens are empowered to help improve the quality of life in their neighborhood.
Project Awards

In an attempt to keep our readers more up-to-date about CURA projects, we are featuring a few capsule descriptions of projects currently underway in each issue of the CURA Reporter. The projects listed this time are the winners of CURA’s faculty research competition for interactive research grants in 1994-95. The grants are made possible with funds provided by CURA and the Vice President for Research at the University of Minnesota. They are designed to encourage University of Minnesota faculty to carry out research projects that involve significant issues of public policy for the state and that include interaction with community groups, agencies, or organizations in Minnesota. These grants are available to regular faculty members at the University and are awarded annually on a competitive basis. The results of interactive research grants are published in the CURA Reporter.

Minneapolis Parks and Parkways. The system of parks and parkways in Minneapolis was designed in the 1880s by Charles Loring and H.W.S. Cleveland. Urbanization and changing transportation systems have put growing pressure on these slender strands of public space. A professor of landscape architecture is making an inventory of the existing conditions and design proposals for re-energizing a number of these parks and parkways.

Surface Water and Ground Water Interaction. Pollution of ground water is often caused by infiltration through the shores and bottoms of lakes and rivers. A professor of civil engineering is studying the distribution of leakage on lake shores and lake bottoms. Computer models that simulate the surface water and ground water interaction will be developed and tested. The results will be used to improve the state’s ability to identify and address the true sources of ground and surface water pollution.

Ghettoization of Black Poverty. During the 1980s, there was a dramatic rise in concentrated poverty among African Americans living in the Twin Cities. The Twin Cities became one of the most ghettoized metro areas in the country. A professor in public affairs is examining the change in relationship to what happened in other cities. He will attempt to identify public policies that led to the current situation and recommend changes that can improve the situation in the future.

Relative Foster Care. Children removed from their natural parents are more and more often placed with relatives, thus preserving their heritage. We know little of the success of these placements or what additional resources would improve them. A professor of social work is conducting a study of case files; comparing child well-being for those placed with relatives and those with non-relatives. The study will recommend policies that should improve the results for children placed with relatives.

Hmong Students in the Workplace. Hmong have some of the highest poverty rates of any people of color in the Twin Cities, largely because of high unemployment and limited language skills. As their children move through our public schools and into the workplace, what success will they have? A professor of sociology is tracking young Hmong as they leave high school in St. Paul and move into the workplace. Analysis will focus on public policies that could improve this transition.

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