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# Improving Police-Community Partnerships: A Review of the Literature

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# Improving Police- Community Partnerships

A Review of  
the Literature

Spring 2016

Portland State University

Criminology and Criminal Justice Senior Capstone Class:

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## Introduction

Our examination of community-based policing research and literature includes thirty-two articles. The articles contained original information on departmental procedure, training, and interactions, both positive and negative, between law enforcement organizations and the communities they serve. The overall goal of community-based policing is to improve the relationships between police and their local communities. Community-based policing promotes positive relationships and collaboration between the police and the citizens in communities in which they serve. In order to improve police legitimacy and community relations throughout the country, proper training and a set of new performance standards needs to be implemented nationwide. Maintaining trust with the police and community requires continuous effort and can only be accomplished through multiple components coming together in a systemic, department-wide effort.

## Defining the Problem

Our research included several articles discussing improving police and community relationships. The benefits, challenges, and recommendations for community-based policing are researched from many areas in the United States and throughout the world. Community-oriented policing promotes positive relationships and collaboration between the police and communities, better than police imposition of enforcement and control over citizens (Gill, Weisburd, Telep, Vitter, & Bennett, 2014, p.403). Despite limited effects on crime control, community-oriented policing programs are shown to foster procedural justice, enhance trust in the police force, and increase community satisfaction with police performance (Gill et al., 2014, p.403).

Community policing programs have been utilized during the latter half of the twentieth century. Success is contingent on the public's willingness to work and cooperate with the police by getting involved in neighborhood meetings, actively reporting crimes, participating in neighborhood watches, and sitting on advisory boards (Wehrman & De Angelis, 2011, p.50). There are several ways one can focus on reducing crime such as using Compustat, a focused strategic management system which identifies crime trends, whereas community policing focuses solely on building relationships within the community to prevent crime (Willis, 2011, p.236). Prevention-oriented community-based partnerships and responses to crime are of increased value across the Western world (Goddard, 2014, pp.3-4). Utilizing the Risk Factor Prevention Paradigm, community partners can identify pre-existing conditions and potential juvenile offending (Goddard, 2014, p.4). Strong relations and communication with local law enforcement helps decrease overall criminal activity. A police department's ability adequately to respond to public disorder and address hot spots directly affects the public's trust in the department's effectiveness. If the community does not trust the police force, it may be unwilling to assist or help with crime control (Haberman, Groff, Ratcliffe, & Sorg, 2016, pp.528-529).

Studies show a correlation between citizens building strong foundational relationships and comfortability with law enforcement at an early age. Early, positive engagement by law enforcement can have a significant impact on development and maturity of youths (International

Association of Chiefs of Police [IACP], 2015, p.2). Law enforcement agencies play central roles in reducing and preventing crime, victimization and delinquency amongst youths (IACP, 2015, p.4). When a student has a better sense of school connectedness, violent and delinquent behavior, truancy, substance abuse, and risky sexual behavior are reduced (Theriot, 2016, pp.459-462).

Bridging the gap between community-police relations can be met with apprehension and challenges. Media plays important roles in shaping the public's view of the police. Stewart (2013) reasons that due to media's using a conflict frame perspective, in which police are seen as instruments of oppression, reporting police interactions reduces the public's willingness to trust and cooperate with the police (p.335). Police-citizen encounters involving the use of excessive force can also have devastating effects on whether or not citizens view police officers as legitimate. Research has shown three variables that may influence an officer's decision to use excessive force: situations where officers and suspects come together in time and space; conditions of the social environment; and aspects of the police agencies (Shjarback & White, 2016, p.36).

Police wear many hats, but are often ill-equipped to handle persons with suspected mental illness (PWSMI). The national increase between law enforcement and PWSMI is cause for alarm due to concerns of consumed resources, time, repeated contact, escalation from a police presence, and the sense of an inability adequately to handle persons in mental health crises (Burkhardt et al., 2015, p.2). Although police are the point of first contact in an emergency, they are simply not the appropriate responses to individuals experiencing mental health crises and instead fill the role because they lack alternative resources.

## Persons Involved

Community-oriented policing programs face a number of challenges, including being able properly to identify and define "community." A community needs to be clearly identified in order to produce results on whether or not community-oriented policing programs have positive effects on citizens (Gill et al., 2014, p.422). Community policing goes beyond simply putting officers on foot and bicycle patrols; it redefines the role of the officer on the street, from crime-fighter to problem-solver for a neighborhood patrol. This philosophy asks officers to break away from incident-driven policing and to seek proactive and creative resolutions to crime and disorder (Willis, 2011, pp.237-238).

Just over twenty percent of law enforcement personnel are unsworn, with merely general arrest powers to act as support to sworn officers (Reaves, 2015, p.2). Specific school safety programs such as using School Resource Officers (SROs), where law enforcement officers or support staff are present in middle and high schools had resulted fewer arrests for weapon possession and assault charges (Theriot, 2016, p.449). Campus public safety groups at colleges and universities may also employ sworn safety officers or SROs. In many cases these advocates and security officers are the first and only responders to campus problems (Smith, Wilkes, & Bouffard, 2015, p.541).

In order for police officers to function effectively, they need community assistance. How citizens perceive police activity can impact entire communities (even the entire nation), in similar fashion to what happened in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 (Shjarback & White, 2016, p.33). Both public and private sectors are now heavily involved with performance measurement, allowing greater involvement in holding L.E. organizations accountable. Implementing procedures for police departments allows quantification of citizen complaints against police and may be used to improve community policing (Davis, Ortiz, Euler, & Kuykendall, 2015, pp.470-474).

Communities can also support police to keep the peace. Washtenaw County, Michigan has implemented a domestic violence advocacy group with polices requiring police to make arrests on domestic violence cases. Police play an integral role in trauma support, advocacy, and perpetrator intervention (Larance & Rousson, 2015, pp.2-4). In Washington, results stemming from Domestic Violence Fatality Reviews have proven to be a great tool for developing stronger bonds between community members and law enforcement personnel because of the need to work closely when identifying gaps in community responses to domestic violence (Storer, Lindhorst, & Starr, 2013, p.432).

One such gap is in how police deal with PWSMI. Communities can initiate policy reforms focusing on mental health courts and specialized mental health training for officers to be better equipped to deal with PWSMI (Burkhardt et al., 2015, p.6). Another gap is found in how police interact with youths. The Risk Factor Prevention Paradigm is a successful tool to identify relationships between prior conditions and possibilities for youths offending (Goddard, 2014, p.4). Youths may be victimized in many situations which requires police to be involved in homes, schools, and online. Early intervention can reduce crimes throughout adulthood (IACP, 2015, pp.1-3).

Police contact has an impact on peer association and self-esteem amongst youths. Many youths with negative police interactions have felt intimidated by police which resulted in dramatic declines in favorable attitudes towards the police (Ravulo, 2016, p.40). Early education working to reduce youth violence is helpful in breaking the cycle, as are early intervention programs addressing risks experienced by children of abuse stemming from behavioral problems and Post-Traumatic Stress (McFarlane, Maddoux, Nava, & Gilroy, 2015, pp.250-252; McQueeney, 2016, pp.1-3). Law enforcement is viewed as a pillar of the community and officers engaged in the community may change opinions about police behavior (Eith & Durose, 2015, p.2).

### Barriers to Improvement

There are a number of barriers to improving relationships between police department personnel and members of the communities they serve. The nature of policing is difficult and requires trust and cooperation from the public, especially during volatile and stressful situations. Police officers must demonstrate both impartiality and fairness when dealing with the public. Perceived unfairness can quickly escalate to violence and can have damaging long-term consequences,

including loss of public confidence and compromised legitimacy. Shjarback and White (2015) established a link between administrative policies, with respect to professionalism, and violence between police and citizens. They say only departmental commitment to education (i.e., mandating associate's degrees, or higher, prior to employment) has any significant impact on lowering rates of complaints of use of force and lowering rates of assaults on officers. The researchers conclude the barrier lies in that, while professionalism is a must, "professionalizing" a department through hiring standards, training and increased female representation appears to be empirically insignificant (pp.47-51).

Public trust, especially which of minorities, is a cornerstone of effective policing. Maintaining trust requires continuous effort and can only be accomplished through multiple components coming together in systemic, department-wide efforts. Even then, just one perceived wrongdoing may reverse much positive work. Pacific Islander youths in Australia, for example, are overrepresented in youth courts (Ravulo, 2016, p.35). Ravelo also found police contacts negatively affected youths' abilities to perceive themselves positively (2016, p.41). In the U.S, even if law abiding, persons living inside hot spot areas have a greater chance of coming in contact with police officers (Haberman et al., 2016, p.542). They are also more likely to hear second-hand accounts of police interactions and witness others being investigated. It should be noted that persons with mental illnesses experience disproportionate rates of police arrests and criminal charges for minor offenses, compared to the general population, despite being more likely to be victims of crimes, rather than offenders (Schulenberg, 2015, p.459).

Tension between police officers and citizens has resulted in a number of jurisdictions implementing forms of police accountability. That said, strengthening accountability is difficult without clear directions and specific plans of attack (Willis, 2011, p.242). Poor communication increases difficulties. Law enforcement agencies are encouraged to adopt anti-racial profiling policies, but the policies, themselves, are only as strong as the implementation and non-bias of those enforcing it (Miller, 2013, pp.35-36).

As evidenced in Germany, separate organizations with overlapping responsibilities, may lead to confusion and, ultimately, lack of responsibility from both organizations (Frevel, 2013, pp.360-362). Lack of coordination between police, medical staff, and prosecutors (or other agencies), may also lead to compromised victim response experiences (Gaines & Wells, 2015, pp.3-4). Since the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States there has been significant progress in implementing policies with respect to intelligence capacity and information-sharing among local and state law enforcement agencies. Inability to identify threats, however, still exists, to some degree, and has resulted in delays in provision of services (Chermak, Carter, Carter, McGarrell, & Drew, 2013, p.233). Barriers also exist between law enforcement agencies and researchers. The most salient problems lie around failure of researchers to familiarize themselves with local terminology and to tailor studies to specific neighborhoods examined (Burkhardt et al., 2015, pp.10-12).



## Better Practices

The rise of community-oriented policing throughout the nation has led to varying views on how police departments should implement the model. Many researchers believe community policing practices should begin in schools. Theriot (2016) correlated a relationship between students who interacted with their SROs and increased positive attitudes towards SROs, years later on college campuses (p.461). Youth-focused policing could benefit from collaboration with volunteers from within a community. Research indicates volunteers partnering with local law enforcement agencies can lead to helping meet the individual needs of youths in a community (IACP, 2015, p.20). Community-oriented policing practices can prove have positive impacts in elementary schools, as well as on college campuses.

There is promising progress being made in efforts to reduce instances of sexual assault, which can be difficult to manage, due to inadequate funding for services and lack of community resources (Kulkarni, Bell, & Rhodes, 2012, p.94). DeMaria et al. found educating college students on sexual assault statistics and how to identify situations needing interventions, would reduce sexual assault cases, as well as contribute to safer communities (p.16). For sexual assault incidents not prevented, researchers found criminal justice support could help provide aid to victims (Muldoon, Taylor, & Norma, 2015, p.283). Another study revealed community and police relations improved through court ordered processes supporting victims (Bailey, Mace, Powell, & Benson, 2015, p.1313).

Some researchers believe the way to improve policing practices is to focus on geographical areas known to have criminal activity (Koper, 2014, p.136). Many police agencies are now “hot spot” policing, which, research has shown, has a significant impact on crime rates in a community, providing community members with a sense of relief from frequent crime (Weisburd & Telep, 2014, p.204). Hot spot policing focuses police attention in high crime areas for longer periods of time. By doing so, more criminals are captured, which equates to “cleaning up the streets.” One could argue the most important research finding about hot spot policing is that it results in a reduction of fear for community members (Haberman et al., 2016, p.544). Reducing fear is a pivotal step in improving police-community relations and is a positive step in improving police legitimacy.

In order to improve police legitimacy and community relations throughout the country, proper training and new performance standards must be implemented nationwide. According Randol, having guidelines and proper training allows police units to adapt to a variety of situations, at any given time (2012, p.317). One way assist in developing a strong relationship with the community is for police agencies to standardize performance measurements. Research shows a standardized performance measure will allow agencies to measure their quality of service, safety, and legitimacy department-wide (Davis et al., 2015, p.487). Police departments’ ultimate goal is to establish good relationship with the communities they serve because cooperative relationships will be beneficial to both police officers and community members. The key lies within the hands of the police officers. Stewart (2013) contends in order for policing agencies to be viewed as



legitimate by their communities, they must represent their communities and uphold their values (p.352).

## Implications for Policy and Training

Our team reviewed seven articles identifying ways to improve police-community relations through police department policies and trainings. Police agencies, as a whole, in the U.S. have enjoyed high levels of unconditional support (Zhao & Ren, 2015, p.20). Even so, there are always ways to improve community relations.

Community policing advocates forcefully argue that police strategies should be tailored to the needs of the public, both at the personal and neighborhood levels (Zhao & Ren, 2015, p.20). Increasing efforts to engage citizens produces greater levels of satisfaction and trust than ‘policing as usual.’ Mobilized citizens, who are willing to work with police, allow the “tactical” element of community-oriented policing (collaborative problem-solving) to begin (Gill et al., 2014, p.421). An important factor in willingness to cooperate is knowing the police officer (Wehrman & De Angelis, 2011, pp.62-63). Because of this, it is imperative to implement programs to encourage members of the community to become involved and establish relationships between individual officers and citizens.

Citizens, who feel safe and view the police as partners in creating such an environment, are empowered to take responsibility for crime control. This can create sustainable self-regulation which can survive turnover in both police administrations and the population, at large (Gill et al., 2014, p.421). In order to reduce crime, at the community level, it is important to understand the unique needs of a given community. This can be accomplished through identification of hot spots of crime activity. Hot spots are identified through, not only the assessment of crime data, but also involvement of citizens, through community meetings with residents, business owners, and other neighborhood organizations. The meeting can focus proactively and creatively on problems, while simultaneously establishing relationships between the community and law enforcement officers. This can also be fostered through training programs teaching police officers about high risk groups, likely locations, allowing for improved time management while on patrol. Officers could also be trained to focus on prevention and intervention of criminal acts when possible, rather than reacting to crimes after they are committed (Koper, 2014, pp.138-139).

Another way for police to engage with the community is through contacts with parents. Increasing the police understanding of recidivist juvenile offending behavior, as well as implementing educational programs, in which the police are involved with parents, could help ease tensions and increase understanding between communities and officers (Ravulo, 2016, pp.45-46). This could be beneficial for two reasons: Parents see police officers as assets to assist with their children’s behavioral issues and children see their parents and police working together, which may inspire their own willingness to cooperate with police in the future.

Police departments have placed much time and emphasis on reorganizing the professionalism within their departments, usually through education or increasing hiring and training standards (Shjarback & White, 2016, pp.48-50). Research indicates only departmental commitment to high levels of education is related to violence indicators between citizens and officers. Agencies requiring higher education levels for hire experienced fewer citizen complaints of excessive use of force and fewer assaults on officers (Shjarback & White, 2016, p.43). Frevel (2013) found officers with college degrees benefit police administrators because of their enhanced capacities to comprehend, analyze, and act lawfully (pp.363–364). Police departments with higher employment requirements and standards may increase citizen levels of regarding the department.

### Conclusion

Overall, we have looked into the literature relative to improving police and local community relationships. We have identified where and when communities interact with police and how interactions might be improved, in order to foster more positive citizen perceptions of officers. We learned there are many challenges when building community-oriented policing programs. A few examples include defining “community,” the role of media in their portrayal of officers, or effects of negative interactions with police. We discovered there is not just one way to improve police-community relationships, but rather many facets to better overall relationships. It should be noted, there are also several ways to train police officers to interact more constructively with members of their communities, so as to increase community confidence in the police, as well as satisfaction police administrators have with officer performances.

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