

Community policing law

Law



The recent economic downturn and turmoil that has swept the country since 2008 has had many people, both ordinary and pundits, warning of an impending crime wave. The problem has been exacerbated by the fact that many municipalities across the country have been witness to city officials and police chiefs having to lay off law enforcement agents due to budget shortfalls. Stories from Stockton, California, Madison, Washington and other places have been pregnant with dire predictions of rising crime and, concurrently, shrinking law enforcement budgets and manpower. One possible solution to these problems can be found in what is known as 'community policing'. By no means a new concept, it is one which could improve a given community's relationship with its local law enforcement agencies. Community policing is, in essence, a collaboration between the police and the community that identifies and solves community problems. With the police no longer the sole guardians of law and order, all members of the community become active allies in the effort to enhance the safety and quality of neighborhoods. Community policing has far-reaching implications. (Understanding 1994, vii) In the nineteenth century, the first modern police departments, first in the United Kingdom and then in the United States, were drawn from the ranks of the citizenry and had close ties with the geographic areas in which they worked and patrolled. By the beginning of the twentieth century this began to change. " Researchers have suggested that the reform era in government, which began in the early 1900's, coupled with a nationwide move toward professionalization, resulted in the separation of the police from the community" (Understanding 1994, 5-6). This kind of alienation resulted in a professional police force which lacked rapport or loyalty to a specific area, neighborhood, or community. Today America has

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come full circle. The promotion of community policing came as a response to police forces which were seen to have divorced themselves from the communities they served and from which they derived their authority. Community policing claims that officers should go out into neighborhoods and get to know business owners, religious leaders, and/or community activists. Responses to threats or crime spikes should be measured not just by the specific situation but by how the community feels about the issue and how it gauges its significance. Community policing, above all else, is predicated upon fostering trust between a police force and the community it serves. Community policing does have its drawbacks. Since it relies upon ‘organic’ relationships to assess crime threats and community needs, it runs the risk of promoting racial and/or ethnic stereotypes. In places where the victims of crimes are often, though certainly not always, members of an ethnic or racial group apart from that to which the criminals often belong. In the end, community policing can promote racial profiling. The media, T. V., news, and internet do not help. Many people absorb stereotypes of racial and ethnic minorities due to the way the latter are depicted in the media. This in turn affects the way these same people feel about the policy in general. For example, in the crime sections of newspapers, “ethnic minorities are the central focus of crime features and are thus portrayed as the prime source of crime in our nation” (Henry 2007). Very often the victims of these crimes, themselves minorities, are not given face time thus encouraging the stereotype. People of color are almost always the criminals and whites are almost always the victims (when the victim is shown). This general imagery promotes the practice of racial profiling among law enforcement and legitimizes it in the eyes of the public. This tendency in the media “results

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[in a] miscommunication by the reader who assumes that the images and facts portrayed are representations of racial groups as a whole” (Henry 2007). Group think then becomes the order of the day. The images of 9/11 and the Arab terrorists who caused it did nothing more than to greatly underscore the “ need” for racial profiling. Racial profiling “ occurs whenever a law enforcement officer questions, stops, searches, or otherwise investigates a person because the officer believes that members of that person’s racial or ethnic group are more likely than the population at large to commit the sort of crime the officer is investigating” (Gross 2002, p. 1415). Thus this practice stands wholly contrary to modern, that is twentieth century, notions of equality. Investigating, especially arresting, ethnic minorities on the basis of their race, with no other particularized motive, is a direct violation to the 14th Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause (Gross 2002, p. 1415). The ethics then are not easily sidestepped but nor are they especially complicated. Law enforcement and government in general must develop policies which allow for limited targeting of racial or ethnic groups only in specific cases and where there exist specific evidence or witness testimony. Public safety is important, but it may not come at the expense of individual rights. Thus community policing does represent a refreshing return to the way communities should be policed and governed: by the communities themselves. It is surprising that things went for as long as they did with police departments becoming ever more distanced from the communities they served. Community policing can change that as long as it does not promote racial profiling and racism in general. If the police of community policing just become an arm of the majority culture’s viewpoints, then little will really improve. If they instead can build trust and thus reduce

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hate and anger, they will have achieved their ends. To adequately combat the coming crime wave, other approaches will have to be considered in conjunction with community policing. It is not a panacea but it is a partial solution. Works Cited Will Thousands of Police Layoffs Unleash Chaos and Anarchy Across America? Retrieved Aug. 30, 2011 from The Economic Collapse Blog Web site: <http://theeconomiccollapseblog.com/archives/will-thousands-of-police-layoffs-unleash-chaos-and-anarchy-across-america>. Gross, Samuel R. & Debra Livingston. "Racial Profiling under Attack." Columbia Law Review 102: 5 (2002): 1413-1438. Henry, Sylvia. "Racial Profiling in the Media: Investigated Through a Ritualistic Lens." Communications Department of the University of Colorado at Boulder (Fall 2007). Available at: http://www.colorado.edu/communication/meta-discourses/Papers/App_Papers/Henry.htm. Understanding Community Policing: A Framework for Action. Published: August 1994. Retrieved Aug. 30, 2011 from the Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance Web site: <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles/commp.pdf>. Outline I. Intro – social and economic background II. Community Policing at a glance III. Community Policing today IV. Drawbacks of CP – racial profiling V. Conclusion