

The Role of State and Local Law Enforcement Agencies in Homeland Security: Revisiting Community-Oriented Policing*

At the recent first annual National Community Policing Conference: Community Policing Keeps America Safe, held in Washington, DC, a high ranking official within the Justice Department recounted a meeting he had with law enforcement leaders from around the country. They had met to discuss the future of Community-Oriented Policing [COP] in the post 9/11 United States. Although he was initially concerned about whether COP had a future in this era, he walked away from the meeting with a renewed sense of vigor. His conclusion: COP is more relevant and important now than ever before.

Part of the reason that COP is so important to homeland security stems from the fact that COP is largely a grassroots, local enterprise and state and local agencies are the first line of defense when it comes to securing the homeland. Recent training in Texas on the role of state and local agencies in homeland security provides evidence for how prominently these agencies will feature in our efforts to safeguard our communities.

In June, for example, the Texas Regional Community Policing Institute [TRCPI] sponsored training in Austin that was developed by the Wichita (Kansas) State Regional Community Policing Institute on the important role that local and state agencies can play. The training was repeated in the following months in the Dallas/Ft. Worth metroplex, McAllen, and San Antonio. The TRCPI also recently co-sponsored with the Texas Department of Public Safety training at Sam Houston State University on the issue. That training was attended by hundreds of participants, mostly from the Department of Public Safety.

Much of the training focuses on the nuts and bolts of heightened awareness of what goes on in given communities, for example, sales at hardware stores of materials that could be used for pipe bombs or agricultural supply business selling fertilizer that can be used in explosives. Clearly, these kinds of activities relate closely to COP; establishing and maintaining close working relationships with such businesses is a key ingredient in the COP recipe. But the role of COP in homeland security goes much deeper than this and its true benefit is less obvious.

Community-Oriented Policing, fundamentally, is about *community*. COP involves, at a minimum, engaging communities and, at times, building them. Building communities does not involve construction capital in the form of bricks and mortar, but rather involves the generation of social capital—value that inheres in the relationships that people have with one another and with businesses and government. Our social capital has been declining steadily in recent years and this negative social momentum has left us relatively more vulnerable to attacks both from within and from without.

Evidence of our national loss of a sense of community abounds. Robert D. Putnam chronicled this phenomenon in his book, “Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.” The title of the book is derived from a specific observation that captures the essence of our loss of connectedness. Putnam observed that roughly the same percentage of Americans go bowling

now as did in the 1950s. The difference, he points out, is that the activity is far less likely to occur in the context of teams or leagues; contemporary Americans are much more likely to go bowling alone.

This detachment also exists at the neighborhood level. A couple of years ago, for the first time since such data have been collected, a majority of Americans polled could not name *a single person* who lived on their blocks. On a more personal level, although my childhood spanned the 60s and 70s when, presumably, communities were much stronger, I knew more people from Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood than I did from my own. And I am not alone.

The annual nationwide survey of entering freshmen increasingly shows incoming college students who have no intention of engaging in any extra-curricular activity whatsoever. Most of them also report never having had *even one* meaningful conversation with a teacher. Not surprisingly, the same survey shows heightened levels of anxiety and emotional disorder among these students.

COP helps us rebuild our collective sense of community. With greater connectedness to others we have a heightened awareness of what goes on in our communities and, thus, are better positioned to know when something is wrong. In this way, to borrow the title from the recent conference, Community Policing Keeps America Safe.

In the 1980s, while employed in law enforcement full time, I had occasion to accompany my agency's crime prevention officer, Jerome Jozwiak, on a couple of meetings to establish local Neighborhood Watch programs. At the time, I was interested in the professional, technical aspects of the meetings: double-cylinder locks with a one-inch throw, trimming bushes so they were at least six inches from windows and so forth. Jerome, on the other hand, was focused on the personal and relational aspects of the neighborhood (he is now the local Justice of the Peace, incidentally). Many of those neighbors were meeting each other for the first time. They needed to know the advantages of high-pressure sodium and mercury vapor lights, but they also needed to know each other and if I had to bet on which made them safer, my money would be on the neighbors, not the lights.

President Bush has made it clear that homeland security is the business of every American citizen. Each of us has a potential role. The White House reportedly was flooded with calls from Americans offering to volunteer to help after the attack. Inevitably, the question became, "how?" Knowing and caring about our own communities is an important first step. If we cannot accept mutual responsibility for one another at the local level, then there is little hope we can do so at the national level. The promise of COP in homeland security, therefore, is in building stronger communities where people care about their communities and the people who live in them. Washington is doing its part; our armed forces are mobilized and fighting the war on terrorism on multiple fronts overseas. But as for the home front, its security is largely up to us.

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