

**Getting Out of the Car:  
Better Enforcement and Greater Legitimacy Through Officer-Community Contact**

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### **Abstract**

Recent events have brought into sharp focus the high level of distrust many communities feel toward their police. One key reason for this is the disconnect between police and the communities they serve, a problem caused in part by the methods of policing used in the professional model of policing that has been the dominant style of policing since at least the 1960's (Brown, 2012, p. 45). This method of policing physically separated police officers from the people in the neighborhoods they police. There is a need to re-establish relationships between officers and residents by creating policing methods that encourage contacts between them. Community Policing, as it has been described by Lee Brown (2012) is such a model, but it has rarely been implemented to its fullest capacity because doing so requires deep change to the way departments currently operate. This project explores the history of the professional policing model, barriers to changing it, and suggested solutions for overcoming those barriers.

## **Introduction**

It has long been understood that there is a lack of trust between some communities and the police (Fontaine, Leitson, Jannetta, & Paddock, 2017). Recently, however, protests, widespread outcry against the police and their methods, and calls for defunding and even abolishing the police have foregrounded the level of resentment some communities feel toward their police. In May 2020, the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer during his arrest for using a counterfeit \$20 bill sparked nationwide outrage. An American public, already weary from the stresses of the Covid-19 pandemic and amid an especially contentious presidential election, erupted into protests which, in many places, spawned rioting and public disorder.

Police responses to protesting and rioting was widely varied across the country, and often brought further scrutiny on police actions. In Buffalo, NY, two officers were suspended after knocking a 75-year-old protestor to the ground (Taylor, 2021). Meanwhile, the Seattle Police Department abandoned one of its own precincts when protestors set up the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zones. Police only returned to the area and removed protestors after four shootings and reports of sexual assault in the zone (Nagesh, 2020). Many in the public saw heavy-handed police response to protests as further evidence that the system of policing in the United States was broken and needed to be completely overhauled. Moves to defund police departments grew out of this sentiment, and many cities experimented with partial defunding (Levin, 2021, para. 4). Though most cities that experimented with defunding have reversed course, it will take many of the affected departments years to recover from losses in staffing, especially since the problem of recruiting and retention has reached crisis mode.

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The extreme narrative that American police are violent and racist belies the fact uses of force, including shootings, remain exceedingly rare in police-citizen contacts. Furthermore, data do not support the notion that police are killing African Americans at alarmingly high rates. African American men are, to be sure, killed at higher rates than their distribution of American population at large, but all studies (Miller et al., 2017; Tregle, Nix, & Alpert, 2019; Mullainathan, 2015) that have controlled for mitigating factors like rate of offense, victimization of violent crime, and other metrics have found that, “Nationwide, the black share of those killed by police is not implausibly high, once one takes into account these other statistics. That is important, as it contradicts the common belief that police racism is shockingly rampant and lethal” (VerBruggen, 2022, p. 10).

Despite these data, it is safe to say that a public image problem persists. The reasons for this are complex. The proliferation of social media, cell phone cameras, and other technologies mean that the public at large is, often for the first time, being exposed to the harsh realities of policing, which can be an admittedly ugly affair. The twenty-four hour a day national news cycle is also a contributing factor. Incidents that just a couple decades ago would have been local stories lasting one news cycle are now national stories that stack on top of one another so quickly that it gives the appearance that there is an epidemic of police violence. The most important thing police officers can do to counter media portrayals of the police is to engage directly with our communities. People will trust their own experiences. Unfortunately, we have so few experiences with our public that the only thing most people know about the police is what they see in the media. Furthermore, because most contacts we do have with the community are in an enforcement capacity, those experiences are much more likely to be negative.

A key to building legitimacy in our communities is to begin building relationships with community members. Departments have been assigning officers to Police Community Relations roles for a few decades, but these programs have done little to establish relationships between people in the community and the officers who patrol their neighborhoods. Patrol officers, instead, spend most of their time answering calls for service or performing randomized patrol, almost always by driving around. These activities are the hallmarks of traditional policing in the United States, which has been called the professional model of policing (Brown, 2012, p. 43). We argue that the professional model has been detrimental to policing because it has disconnected police officers from their communities. In the following pages, we will outline the history of the professional model and how it has distanced officers from the people they serve. We argue that a community policing model that encourages direct contact between police officers and residents is necessary to establish legitimacy in the community and to provide better and more effective law enforcement. Finally, we acknowledge the barriers currently in place to establishing such a model and offer proposed action steps to overcome these barriers and establish community policing in its fullest form and police leaders' responsibilities in making these changes.

### **History of the Professional Model**

The professional model of policing, as it has been described by Lee Brown (2012), has become so universal across the United States that it has become naturalized. Police administrators and police officers alike rarely know that this system has a history and that it was built on a set of values and beliefs that now undergird how policing is done in this country. Though the professional model would not fully hit its stride until the 1960s, its inception dates back as far back as the 1930s.

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Prior to this time, police officers in many cities were appointed positions, usually appointed by aldermen or councilmen of the wards officers patrolled. Policing was a low-paying job, and not generally considered a professional career. Unsurprisingly, policing became marred by corruption in this system. In the 1930s, August Vollmer and O.W. Wilson began to conceptualize policing as a profession where officers would be educated and well-managed. In this approach, policing would be separated from local politics and officers would instead work as part of a management bureaucracy, beholden to the objective letter of the law and established professional standards. It was Wilson that encouraged the widespread use of the automobile to respond to calls for service. Interestingly, Wilson included in his concept the need to lessen, “the close contact between police and community so that potentially corruptive influences would decrease” (Brown, 2012, p. 43).

By the 1960s, the professional model was fully mature and was becoming the dominant model in the United States. Though wide-spread corruption had certainly been largely curtailed in the professional model, there were also negative consequences that persist today. Car-based radio response and the introduction of 911 systems meant that officers were now often running call to call. Officers spent most of their time responding to 911 calls. What time was left was spent writing reports or driving around in the police car. While the use of automobiles clearly had benefits in terms of efficiency and the ability for fewer officers to cover more territory, Radley Balko (2014) has also pointed to some of the drawbacks. He argues that the use of squad cars, “could also isolate police officers from the residents of the communities they patrolled. Cops out walking beats could chat with citizens, form relationships, and become part of the community. Squad cars gave cops a faceless and intimidating presence” (p. 34). Officers assigned to radio patrol using vehicles to respond to calls tend not to have interactions with

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citizens except in an enforcement capacity. This has caused residents to have particularly negative views of police officers.

In addition to changing the way residents see officers, these aspects of the professional model have also affected the way police officers view the residents of their districts. Balko argues that disconnecting officers from residents instilled in officers, “the notion that they were all that stood between order and anarchy—all of this could make police view citizens in their districts as at best the *other*, and at worst, the enemy” (p. 35). Police rhetoric about the “thin blue line” and statements about how “people sleep soundly in their beds at night because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf” (Grenier, 1993) speak to this tendency. In the professional model, officers can often come to view residents with suspicion and residents can come to see the officers as an occupying force.

Departments have attempted several strategies to respond to this problem. The most widely used and enduring method has been the establishment of Police-Community Relations (PCR) units. These stand-alone units, however, have had little impact on the relationship between individual community members and the patrol officers with whom they have direct contact. Information received by PCR officers often fails to reach patrol officers. Furthermore, PCR officers may spend a great deal of time teaching classes in public settings and attending community meetings, but do not typically spend time having one-on-one conversations with individual residents. PCR programs, by and large, have failed to establish the kinds of relationships between police and communities required to build legitimacy and repair the divisions that have become so evident in recent years.

In terms of service to the public, it would be hard to argue that the professional model has been successful, even though it made policing highly efficient and remarkably professional. The

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President's Task Force on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Policing (2015) found that, "since the 1990s, policing has become more effective, better equipped, and better organized to tackle crime. Despite this Gallup polls show the public's confidence in police work has remained flat, and among some populations of color, confidence has declined" (p. 9). A new model of policing is needed, which would reestablish relationships in the community, rebuild public confidence, and build legitimacy. Community policing, properly established, offers such a model.

### **Community Policing**

Lee Brown (2012) has provided a descriptive definition for community policing as "a collaborative partnership between police and law-abiding citizens designed to prevent crime, arrest offenders, solve neighborhood problems and improve the quality of life in the community" (p. 150). What distinguishes community policing from Police-Community Relations programs is that, instead of being a function of dedicated units in a traditional police department as PCR Units are, community policing is an organizational philosophy involving all officers on a department. As the President's Task Force (2015) explained, "every officer is expected to get to know the residents, businesses, community groups, churches, and schools on their beat and work with them to identify and address public safety challenges, including quality of life issues, such as blight" (p. 43).

In terms of actual police activity, this means that officers must get out of their cars and interact with residents in an egalitarian manner. Officers must invest in the communities they serve, getting to know the people who live there and building trust by approaching these relationships as equal partnerships. These relationships are key not only to building legitimacy, but also to effective law enforcement.



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When Captain Jeff Spruill was supervising a sector on the south side of Oklahoma City, he attended a block party thrown by the College Hills Neighborhood Association, a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood near Mount Saint Mary Collegiate High School. After spending the better part of the evening playing “Mexican Bingo,” he distributed his business card to a few key people. One of these people was a woman named Mary who was seen by the community as something of a neighborhood mom. This was during a time when tough immigration laws were being passed by the state government and trust between the police and Hispanic communities was strained. For this reason, many people in the neighborhood were taking their problems to Mary instead of to the police. One particular issue involved a man exhibiting suspicious behavior. After hearing from about three different neighbors, Mary knew that there was something to these complaints and so she reached out to Captain Spruill and reported what she had been hearing. She was able to describe the incidents, the suspicious person, and even provide a house where she suspected he lived. After officers investigated further, it was clear that this was a sexual predator that police needed to be aware of and he was eventually arrested. The time Captain Spruill and Mary spent together built a level of trust that allowed her to reach out to him with neighborhood problems that otherwise the police would not have known about.

Such relationships allow officers to affect quality of life issues beyond enforcement as well. While serving as a patrol officer, Captain Dan Sharp developed a relationship with an elderly woman in his district after taking frequent calls for service at her home. She was beginning to have cognitive problems which caused her to believe people were in her yard. Captain Sharp’s relationships with her developed to the point that he knew where she kept a hidden house key in case he hadn’t heard from her in a while and needed to enter the house to

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check her welfare. He would often stop by to do so and would occasionally have to perform simple services like pointing out that she had left her refrigerator standing open. To patrol officers immersed in the call-response method of traditional policing, such interactions may seem extraneous to police work. But these relationships and small acts of service give our residents a sense of safety and peace of mind.

Our system of policing needs to experience deep change so that these types of interactions are not the responsibility of a small and often disconnected PCR unit but instead are a part of the daily work of every police officer on patrol. The professional model, however, is deeply ingrained in American policing. Police departments are staffed and budgeted with the techniques of traditional policing in mind. Urban sprawl, which began about the same time that the professional model was maturing, makes car-based policing a necessity. Policing cannot simply revert to a golden age that never existed where officer friendlies walked the streets, spinning their whistles. Instead, police leaders must develop a community policing model that takes into account the challenges of contemporary communities, available technologies, and the expectations of our residents. This means that we first need to understand the barriers that exist in transitioning from the tradition model to a community policing model.

### **Addressing Barriers**

The first barrier that police departments will need to overcome to establish a community policing model is the actual barrier between officers and the community. There are many factors contributing to this problem. Already disconnected by the features of traditional policing, officers have been further disconnected in the past two years because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Officers were restricted from visiting restaurants, eating in groups, and otherwise encouraged to maintain social distancing guidelines. Staffing shortages exacerbated by a growing recruitment

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and retention crisis contribute to the problem as well. Officers are running from call to call and have little time to have conversations with members of the community (Brown, 2012, p. 45). Recent stigma in the media and social media due to events around the country has turned officers from heroes to villains almost overnight. Due to this stigma, just as citizens find it difficult to trust police, officers have a slight distrust in citizens in the community because they do not know whether they like or support them. We have both found ourselves, for the first time in our careers, reluctant to approach citizens to initiate casual conversations, waiting instead until we “know where we stand.” This has led to missed opportunities where community members could engage with officers in conversation.

Even though these barriers have influenced simple interactions between police and community members, the implementation of a true community policing model was already slowed by the move toward more statistical and data-driven policing. As opposed to “broken window” or community policing methods of patrol, where officers knew who lived where and who owned what businesses in their assigned district, officers focused on enforcement activity that would boost numbers (Giacalone & Vitale, 2017). Technology has had an effect as well, as it has led officers to stop getting out of their cars to talk with community members because they were able to rely on the computer to perform most functions.

“Agencies have worked hard to increase transparency, revise policies to enhance procedures, recruit and hire officers who reflect the communities they serve, reduce use-of-force incidents, and focus on eliminating police cultures that prevent officers holding each other accountable” (Cunningham, 2021, para.4). However, agencies have not encouraged or rewarded line-level officers for making non-enforcement contacts with community members. Agencies need to encourage officers to get out of their cars and to engage one-on-one with community

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members in their assigned patrol districts in a non-enforcement setting. This allows community members to get to know the officers that patrol their neighborhoods.

Not everyone attends Coffee with a Cop, Neighborhood Night Out or other events of this type. Only a select few get contacted during these events, and they are generally attending because they are already supportive and trusting of the police, though they may also be our most visible assets and liaisons with the community. Encouraging officers to make non-enforcement contacts with community members in the daily patrol districts, can help build legitimacy and community support of the entire department. The culture within the department must change so that it encourages and rewards officers for these types of non-enforcement contacts with the public whether these are at the restaurant, store, or just getting out of the car and speaking with people hanging out in their yard in their patrol district. These types of interactions can have an impact on crime, recruiting, and overall police community relations (Weissman, 2017, para. 6).

### **Solutions:**

We as leaders need to set the example by engaging in non-enforcement community contacts outside of the normal business association meetings, Coffee with a Cop events, and other structured events. We need to lead by example by going around our assigned patrol areas and making individual contacts. We must encourage our followers to do this as well and celebrate officers who take the initiative to make such contacts. As leaders, we can work to change the culture by leading by example and rewarding or celebrating officers who make these types of contacts.

Leadership will need to support these efforts by adjusting the agency's activity tracking system that determines how the agency scores activity. Most agencies track activity through a type of point system. Each activity performed throughout a shift, such as reports, citations,

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misdemeanor arrests, felony arrests, etc. is assigned a certain value. For example, the Oklahoma City Police Department assigns each activity a point value based on its significance and the amount of work required. Officers are held to certain standards in activity points for their performance evaluations. Agencies need to give points or credit not only for tickets and arrests but also for making community contacts. Most officers are competitive by nature and work to have a high number of activity points on their daily activity reports. These points generally come from citations, arrests, and reports, which means that departments privilege enforcement activity. Agencies should include in the point system a way to give credit to officers who are making community contacts. An example would be when an officer makes a non-enforcement contact with a citizen in their patrol district, they can generate a call and add notes to the call. This would allow the activity to be tracked and verified but would also give credit for performing activity consistent with the community policing model.

As effective leaders, we must be able to influence our followers to embrace the concept of getting out of their cars, interacting with the public in non-enforcement contacts and getting to know community members in the areas they patrol. To accomplish this, leaders need to use their versatility skills and style-shift to inspire their team or shift to buy-in to this concept by appealing to the competitive nature of their officers. As documented by Terry Anderson et al. (2017), "People who are versatile in their approaches to others will consider the individual style preferences of others and tend therefore to be more versatile and effective than those who do not" (p. 247).

We must start changing the culture early on in officers' careers while they are still in the academy and in field training by instilling the mindset of community policing, which includes

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getting out of the car and talking to people. This will have a long-term effect on recruiting, solving crimes, and police-community relations.

A significant barrier to implementing a community policing philosophy is the current staffing problems many agencies are facing. There is no simple solution to this problem, but insufficient staffing prevents officers from having the time to have conversations with citizens. Officers engaged in community policing can be part of the solution. A culture that encourages every officer to be a recruiter must be created in the agency. Officers are our best recruiters by having daily positive interactions with the public. “Every day we have dozens of contacts with victims, witnesses, business owners, reporting parties, etc.” (Cobb, 2020). Officers should build rapport during these contacts. A couple of officers handing out business cards now and then is not enough. As leaders, we must act and transform the culture. Many current officers have said they decided to explore law enforcement as a career following one of these types of contacts.

Research has shown that more than 60 percent of law enforcement officers were drawn to their professions by friends or family within law enforcement. This type of recruiting is happening at all levels and by all members of the agency, and not specific to only those assigned to recruiting duties. Therefore, managers must develop a culture of recruitment within the agency as well as guidelines for patrol officers to follow. (Langham, 2017, para. 13)

Patrol officers should be educated on the basic recruiting information related to the agency so that when encountering community members who may inquire about a career in law enforcement, they can give informative answers, instead of the common response of telling them to contact the recruiting office or visit the department website.

Not only do these simple contacts have an impact on recruiting, but they also aid in gaining public support, solving crimes, and building trust in the community (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 1994, p. 4). Members of the community that may not want to call the police to report what they know about a crime would be willing to speak with the officer they are familiar with who patrols their neighborhood. Often, community members know who the bad actors are that live in the community but fail to report out of fear because they feel that the police will not be around to protect them if they report. On the other hand, when community members feel they have close relationships with their officers, they are more likely to trust that the police can protect them and that they will be around to do so.

### **Leadership Responsibilities in Implementing Deep Change**

As we have suggested, a move from the traditional model to a community policing model is a massive shift in philosophy, requiring what Larry Long (2017) has called deep change. Deep change occurs when leadership recognizes that the values of the organization no longer align with the needs of the community. The technocratic style of professional policing is no longer acceptable to a community that requires empathetic and legitimate policing. To move our organizations forward, leaders will need to begin with value alignment across the organization. Messaging needs to be frequent and consistent that our organization values community contact and that the vision for our agency includes building relationships with community members and partnering with the community to address crime. Leaders must consistently live within these values and vision so that subordinates have an example to follow. Implementing these changes may need to begin by rewriting vision and mission statements to come into line with community policing values.

An important approach to facilitate this organizational change is what Brian Ellis (2017) has called Community Leadership. In this model, officers connect directly with citizens, using their expertise and resources to help residents solve problems. These contacts help to combat the cynicism caused by the impersonal, disconnected tactics of the professional model. In this approach to leadership, leaders recommit to good citizenship and provide opportunities and incentives for officers to do the same. Leaders and informal leaders identified as change agents become involved in organizations or activities that focus on community connection. Through these activities, leaders encourage a professional culture of service to the community. Officers who engage in these activities are more likely to see the good in their community rather than having only negative experiences common in the call-response method of policing.

A transformational approach to leadership is also necessary to inspire others to accept and live into the values of the agency and this new approach to policing. Implementation will need to include emotional intelligence training for leaders and officers so that officers will have the tools to communicate effectively with community members who may not always speak to officers in the deferential manner to which officers are accustomed.

Officers who have been trained in the traditional model and who have been successful using its strategies may feel discomfort with being asked to police in a new way. They may worry about how their performance will be evaluated and whether they have the soft skills necessary to perform well in this new system. Leadership must be sensitive to these fears and must be able to mentor subordinates to adjust to this new form of policing.

Finally, at the organizational level, it will be necessary for leadership to reevaluate the department's processes so that the changes we're asking officers to make will be possible for them. This means, as Mitch Javidi (2003) has noted, that leadership must consider the



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organization in a systems context when implementing change. As he has argued, “no single thing can change without influencing every part of the system” (p. 2). Indeed, one of the weaknesses of previous attempts to introduce forms of community policing, such as PCR Units, is that departments attempted to add these projects without making systemic changes to the entire department. Instead, leadership must understand how changing our expectations of officers must also change the systems that support their work. As we have mentioned, changes will need to be made to our activity tracking systems. Furthermore, leadership will need to examine innovative ways to change the workload for patrol officers to allow them sufficient time to connect with the community. This may require automating some reporting systems so that officers spend less time making non-criminal reports that now take a great deal of time, or it may require adding civilian positions to perform some of these duties. Leadership should be proactive and anticipating and preparing for these changes.

### **Conclusion**

Recent events have brought into harsh focus the lack of trust between police and some of our communities. As public servants, we have the responsibility to take the first steps toward bridging this divide. Policing needs to be reimagined in a way that allows officers and communities to partner with each other to prevent and solve crime and to build legitimacy in the communities we serve. A move toward a fully fledged community policing model where police officers are fully integrated into their communities is the way forward. Such a shift will constitute a major systemic change, so strong, ethical, and dedicated leadership is essential. Our officers need it, and our communities demand it.

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