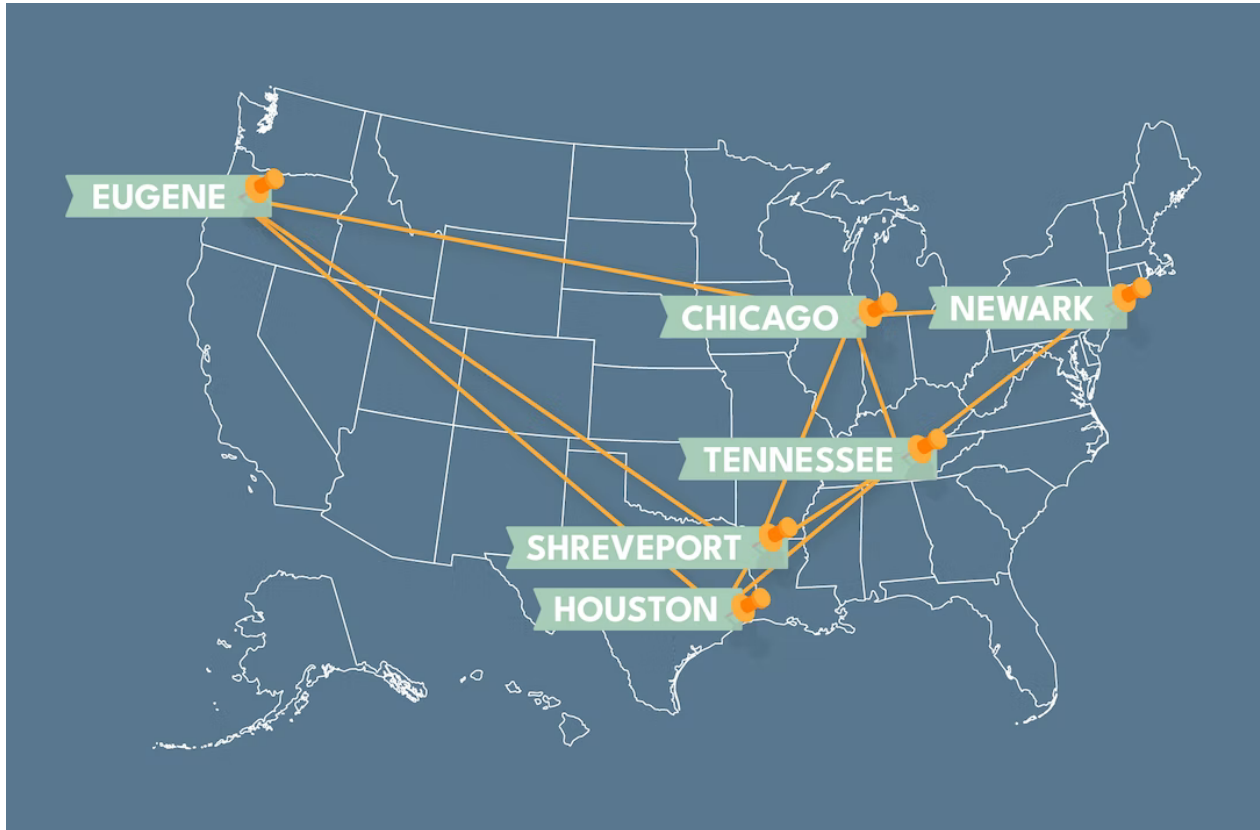


Community Policing: Reimagining Public Safety for the 21st Century



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The crux of every thriving community is public safety and the ability for citizens to feel comfortable living their lives without fear. The governmental response to public safety has traditionally been law enforcement, but as society advances, so too must the solutions employed to confront our complex problems. This is where community policing enters the picture. It's not a new concept in the American lexicon, but it is experiencing a new wave of enthusiasm. Local governments across the country have incorporated community policing initiatives as an addition to traditional law enforcement methods and achieved practical, equitable, and meaningful enhancements to their public safety.

Police officers cannot overcome every public safety obstacle alone and require collaboration with and by the community to ensure citizens are protected and safe. At a time when the nation is looking to law enforcement to reduce their use of force while simultaneously being tough on crime, officers must also be able to rely on government and community resources that would assist them

in doing their jobs effectively. Across America, public servants from teachers to nurses to police officers are being asked to do more and more in roles they have not been equipped to fulfill. Just as schoolteachers should not be expected to assume the role of guidance counselor, child therapist, and security guard, police officers should not be required to take on duties such as mental health experts, substance abuse specialists, and family support professionals.

The reality for police officers is that expectations in the line of duty often far exceed the job description. In many communities, police officers are the only defense available to triage all levels of emergency situations. Police officers alone cannot alleviate every public safety issue that arises and require collaborative efforts with the community to best ensure all needs are met.

Several cities have taken the initiative to think outside the box and implement groundbreaking strategies to make communities safer and improve life for all who live there. From violence intervention programs, to improved homelessness strategies, to mental health support, these communities have refocused safety efforts to not only respond to crime, but to focus on averting the conditions that cause crime in the first place. These strategies place more of an emphasis on assistance, allowing police officers to stay focused on enforcement. Public safety is only effective if the public *feels* safe, and community policing is a key component in illustrating what that can look like in our country today.

What is Community Policing?

Community policing is not a one-size-fits-all strategy that can be copied and pasted. Some communities are facing gun violence and organized crime. Some are struggling with homelessness and economic inequality. Other communities are treating an influx of drug addiction coupled with a lack of mental health resources. While all these challenges require a wider range of solutions than traditional law enforcement practices, community policing is a consistent part of the equation.

Community policing is loosely defined as efforts by members of the community to work in conjunction with law enforcement to direct mutual public safety objectives. Programs offering mental health services, drug abuse treatment and prevention, homelessness support, and violent crime intervention have emerged to help communities grapple with the complicated challenges citizens face daily — interacting with but not confined to the criminal justice system. These initiatives may be put in place by local governments, nonprofit groups, business leaders, or just concerned members of a community. They usually have the full support of local police departments, though many can operate independent of law enforcement assistance. For community policing initiatives to be successful, they require involvement from law makers, peace officers, community leaders, and the judicial system alike.

The recent conversation surrounding police reform has incorporated proven community policing models as a solution to alleviate the demands placed on police officers to respond to situations they may not have the proper training or resources to address. As observed by Atlanta Mayor Andre

Dickens, “We think that there’s a possibility for us to have a non-emergency response system that responds to homelessness, mental health challenges, things police have long told us they didn’t have the skill set or the time to respond to.”¹ Policy leaders pushing pragmatic reform efforts have stressed the role community must play in developing comprehensive public safety strategies that require law enforcement and citizens to work together.

Community Policing Across the Country

Almost every municipality incorporates some form of community policing into their public safety platform. The range and depth of these programs are dependent upon the amount of authority shifted from law enforcement and the extent of engagement from members of the community. Here are some of the local communities that have received national attention for their innovative responses to public safety.

Chicago, IL

While the windy city is regarded as one of the most beautiful and prosperous cities in the world, it also faces crime rates consistently exceeding the U.S. national average in violent crime. As city leaders attempt to balance these two realities, the Chicago Police Department is faced with the challenging task of decreasing violence in communities that are often understandably fearful or skeptical of law enforcement. In June 2021, the Chicago Police Department launched an expansion of its community policing program with an enhanced focus on reducing crime in the South and West sides of the city.² These programs are important incremental steps expanding on their community policing efforts dating back to the 90s. The new initiatives encompass youth involvement in arts and athletics, the extension of neighborhood watch groups, and the implementation of “affinity liaisons” within the department.³

Aside from the initiatives launched by CPD, community leaders have also stepped up to develop modern responses to public safety challenges. In 2000, the Cure Violence program was introduced in West Garfield Park, one of the most violent neighborhoods in Chicago. In the program’s first year, it reduced shootings by 67%.⁴ The violence interruption program operates from three core principles of identifying conflict, confronting high risk individuals, and redefining social norms. The program trains a corps of violence interrupters and outreach leaders to detect and mediate potentially violent encounters before they escalate. Workers also engage with high-risk individuals, offering everything from job training to drug intervention to personal counseling.⁵

The Cure Violence program has expanded across the country and internationally, with much success abroad. In 2020, the program was introduced in Atlanta, GA, and has been backed by the city government with a \$5 million allotment from the American Rescue Plan Act.⁶ Cure Violence Atlanta staff seek to dissolve violent conflict by getting to the root of the disagreements, which are often between individuals who are acquainted with each other. By using their community connections and resources and drawing from experiences as a victim of crime or a perpetrator of it,

the violence interrupters have seen significant promise in some of the city's most volatile neighborhoods.

Eugene, OR

In 1989, the City of Eugene and the White Bird Clinic health center collaborated to create a mobile crisis-intervention program called Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets (CAHOOTS). This innovative approach to public safety aimed to take the city's response to mental illness, drug addiction, and homelessness away from law enforcement and put it in the hands of specifically trained professionals.⁷ The program works in tandem with the City of Eugene Police Department, deploying a two-person team of a medic and a trained crisis worker, in lieu of police officers, to respond to various social service calls for assistance. CAHOOTS personnel are often the initial contact for individuals dealing with a mental impairment, utilizing their training to deescalate any threats of danger to oneself or others. In 2019, CAHOOTS teams responded to 24,000 calls.⁸

The City of Eugene funds the program through allocations to the police department, however, management and staffing remains within the White Bird Clinic. Throughout the 30 years of the program's operation, the connection between Eugene police officers and White Bird professionals has grown into a symbiotic relationship with the shared goal of safer streets and stronger communities. Police officers are appreciative of the program for managing the response to situations in which officers are often not trained to handle. As one officer expressed, "We think they're great. They provide a different avenue than just handcuffs."⁹

Following years of unjustified killings of innocent citizens at the hands of police, several cities across the country have looked to Eugene as a model for reforming their public safety systems. In 2021, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) awarded Oregon a federal grant of \$1 million to support the expansion of CAHOOTS-like crisis intervention programs across the country.¹⁰ There is also pending legislation in Congress, spearheaded by Rep. Peter DeFazio (D-OR), that would encourage state Medicaid programs to implement and fund similar initiatives.¹¹

Houston, TX

A decade ago, Houston, TX had a serious homelessness challenge with an estimated 8,500 citizens lacking housing. But since then, the city has succeeded in reducing its homeless population by 55% through the implementation of assistance programs and housing initiatives.¹² As the majority of the complaints from the downtown area received by the Houston Police Department concern misdemeanor crimes committed by unhoused citizens, a decrease in the homeless population equates to a decline in the amount of public intoxication, trespassing, and illegal encampment calls that require police response.¹³ Alleviating homelessness addresses the root cause of these petty crimes that expend so much of the department's resources.

One of the most impactful endeavors implemented by the city was Housing First, a recovery-focused policy that emphasizes the quick transfer to independent and permanent housing before

the more extensive dedication of other support services. This gives individuals a better chance if their basic needs, mainly food and shelter, are met.¹⁴ Other programs require individuals to achieve certain requirements or goals before they become eligible for housing assistance. With Housing First, once someone is moved off the street and into permanent housing, they can then be offered and take full advantage of health, education, and employment assistance.

Houston is just one of the cities where the Housing First strategy is implemented, but it has seen exponential success. Its achievements resulted in a systemwide overhaul of homelessness services and programs, streamlining them all under Housing First guidelines. In addition to cutting the general homeless population in half, Houston has also successfully ended veteran homelessness, securing permanent housing for over 3,500 U.S. veterans.¹⁵ Houston's commitment to Housing First continued throughout the height of the coronavirus pandemic, as the city allocated the majority of its \$26 million in federal emergency funds to support the homeless population on permanent housing and homelessness prevention.¹⁶

Newark, NJ

A 2014 Department of Justice (DOJ) investigation uncovered that the Newark Police Department had been overrun with racist policies, widespread brutality, and deep corruption for decades. The ensuing consent decree forced the department to practically rebuild its law enforcement system from the ground up, resulting in a 40% reduction in serious crime over five years.¹⁷ While reform of the traditional policing model, including best-practices training and the hiring of more officers of color, was instrumental in facilitating this change, it would not have been accomplished without the efforts of community groups like the Newark Community Street Team. The group, comprised mostly of former offenders, works to diffuse violent situations in some of the most dangerous areas.

Founded in 2014 by Newark Mayor Ras Baraka, the Newark Community Street Team is a violence reduction program centered around engaging and mentoring at risk youth in the community. A main component of their strategy is employing non-traditional community leaders who have been previously incarcerated or otherwise entangled with the judicial system.¹⁸ This approach allows staff to more personally and effectively connect with those most prone to commit violent acts, providing them with the resources and guidance they need to make better decisions. In addition to mentorship, the street team offers wellness support, legal services, employment support, and financial hardship assistance.¹⁹

The departmental reforms in conjunction with the work of the street team and other community groups has not only facilitated a reduction in crime but has also vastly improved the relationship between officers and the citizens they protect. In 2020, for the first time in modern history, Newark officers did not fire a single shot, and the department did not spend any money settling police brutality claims.²⁰ Eliminating the use of deadly force not only creates a more controllable situation for the officer, but also prevents the possibility of a tragic outcome that would further

exacerbate the rift between police and citizens. This achievement was undoubtedly the product of improved communication between law enforcement and the community, and the commitment to fostering a relationship of mutual respect.

Shreveport, LA

After a major fight broke out amongst students at a local high school resulting in 23 arrests, a group of dedicated dads mobilized to create a safer environment for not only their children, but the entire student body. Branding themselves “Dads on Duty,” the group of over 40 fathers patrol the halls of Southwood High School offering advice, dad jokes, and a sense of security for students on their way to class.²¹ Alternating shifts between morning, lunch, and after school patrol, the group’s volunteers balance full-time careers with their commitment to Southwood. Several of the fathers were even involved at the school prior to creating the group, a surprising departure from the norm in a space often dominated by mothers.

It was this involvement that prompted the principal of Southwood to contact Michael LaFitte, the father of an 11th grader, to brainstorm strategies to combat the ongoing group violence on school grounds. The school had already employed two resource officers to get a handle on the violence, but they had little impact. Since the Dads on Duty patrols, there have been no group fights on the campus.²² LaFitte attributes their success to just being present and visible as positive role models, especially for those who don’t have father figures. He remarks, “I don't care how old you are or what size you are, it's something about seeing a man, a positive male figure, a father, your daddy or whatever you want to call them, at the school. It will make you straighten up and fly right.”²³ After nationwide publicity of their efforts, including praise from lawmakers and celebrities alike, the group is exploring ways to take their innovative community policing strategy nationwide.

Tennessee

Another innovative strategy in the South was introduced by the Tennessee Department of Commerce to address the rise in domestic violence reports since the beginning of the pandemic. The state regulation requires the over 50,000 licensed beauty professionals to complete an anti-domestic violence training course designed to equip them to recognize signs of domestic violence in their clients and to respond accordingly with available resources. According to the National Commission on Covid-19 and Criminal Justice, the U.S. has seen an 8.1% increase in domestic violence reports since quarantine orders were set in place in 2020.²⁴ Largely attributed to the stress of isolation, compounded by financial uncertainty and emotional anxiety, this uptick in domestic violence has had a lasting impact on women, men, and families.

Studies show that while domestic violence victims are reluctant to report abuse to law enforcement, they often confide in individuals with whom they have developed a friendly, consistent relationship with, such as a beautician or barber.²⁵ This is especially true in the Black community where beauty salons and barbershops are often recognized as social gathering spots where patrons feel

comfortable and accepted. Susanne Post, the salon owner and domestic violence survivor who proposed the law to the Tennessee legislature, noted “the relationship that beauty professionals have with their clients is very special.”²⁶ While the law does not require mandatory reporting, advocates are hoping the specialized training will create an additional level of care that could potentially save a life. Tennessee joins a handful of states, including Arkansas and Illinois, that have incorporated similar measures into law.²⁷

Community Policing Efforts at the Federal Level

The Biden Administration has emphasized community policing initiatives as a vital element of their overall public safety strategy. From highlighting DOJ’s efforts to increase federal funding for community policing programs to proclaiming a week in October as “National Community Policing Week,” the White House has set the stage for mobilizing community policing efforts at the federal level.²⁸ In April 2021, the administration also announced its whole-of-government investment in community violence intervention strategies encompassing actions from multiple federal agencies.²⁹ These efforts have been a strong start in the Administration’s first year.

While the current administration has made important advancements towards solidifying community policing as the mainstay of comprehensive police reform, the federal government has an opportunity to do more to ensure that community policing initiatives are utilized to their fullest potential. Within DOJ, the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) advances community policing across the country through the distribution of information resources and grant funding.³⁰ Like the state programs they fund, their mission is focused on building trust and respect between law enforcement and the citizens they protect. They offer multiple grant options for police departments to fund community policing initiatives within their jurisdiction. Recipients of grant funding are also held to high accountability standards and must adhere to compliance and reporting practices set by COPS.³¹

In addition to being a source of grant funding, COPS should take the lead on defining the elements of a successful relationship between police and the communities they serve. They should emphasize that America’s neighborhoods are not warzones, and those individuals they have sworn a duty to protect are not just civilians, they are neighbors. A small shift in mindset can make a drastic difference in the way police approach their interactions with the public.

COPS can also expand their grant offerings to help departments recruit personnel that have the best interests of the community at heart. They can create grants that fund recruitment specifically for men and women who live where they serve to ensure departments benefit from highly qualified candidates who are deeply invested in their community’s success. It would also be beneficial to offer a program that funds the recruitment of non-officer personnel—including social workers, community liaisons, and substance abuse specialists—to assist the department’s operations in a civilian capacity. Civilian community members have essential skills and experiences that can be

tremendously useful to law enforcement operations, but for one reason or another are not able to obtain a badge.

It would also be extremely useful for COPS to expand their information resources to offer blueprints detailing successful community policing programs that municipalities could implement on their own. Many local governments have the desire to incorporate community policing initiatives but aren't sure where to start or are unable to draft lengthy grant proposals. There are abundant success stories across the country that can be adopted at the local level. DOJ is in the perfect central position to catalogue and showcase real successes nationwide. The Cure Violence and CAHOOTS programs are perfect examples that COPS should highlight as they have already been replicated in several U.S. cities. The COPS website should serve as a source of reliable information where officials can explore innovative community policing strategies and receive informed guidance tailored to their unique circumstances. These small changes at the federal level would make a major impact on creating safer streets in cities across the country.

Conclusion

The public safety needs of 2022 vary greatly from those of 1922, and even those of 2002. It is incumbent upon our policy leaders and government officials to ensure that these obstacles are being confronted with contemporary solutions that bring to bear all of our strengths and resources. Law enforcement must work hand-in-hand with community policing efforts to create the ultimate defense against crime while also supporting those in desperate need of assistance. One entity cannot do it alone. It must be a symbiotic relationship.

As calls for police reform continue to ring throughout the country, they must be answered by deliberate, innovative, and creative approaches to ensure that all citizens feel safe in their neighborhoods and in their interactions with law enforcement. Community policing initiatives bridge the gap between officers and citizens that often leads to distrust and condemnation. And combined with mainstream and robust reforms to policing practices, they can help deliver the trust-based policing that will keep our communities safe.

TOPICS

JUSTICE 36

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