Positive Impact of Neighborhood Policing in Ponca City*

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ABSTRACT

A descriptive review is brought to an early exploring of the effectiveness of a neighborhood community policing structure in place in a community district comprising part of southwest Ponca City, Oklahoma. Several dimensions comprise this analysis for determining the program's effectiveness, including items measuring public fear of crime, neighborhood conditions and problems, public opinion of police services in the neighborhood, and other quality of life indicators. The findings show the structure of neighborhood community policing to provide a broad and positive effect for Westside residents in reducing public perception of their risk of crime, in improving public perception of neighborhood conditions, in the decline in public perception of neighborhood problems, as well as in the increased positive opinion of the police and police services. Implications are identified for communities and police departments either anticipating the adoption of or having a strong interests in establishing community policing initiatives of their own.

INTRODUCTION

For the past two decades, community policing has been the prevailing wind of change among police agencies across the United States. Currently, progressive police departments throughout the United States are assessing the necessary changes in orientation, organization, and operations within police agencies implementing community policing philosophies, and the benefits such change bring to the communities they serve. Although the concept of community policing has sometimes been challenging to always thoroughly comprehend, its key principle reflects a change in the overall direction of policing. Neighborhood centered policing and other community policing strategies would appear to constitute a fundamental shift from traditional incident driven and reactive policing to proactive and/or problem oriented crime control strategies. Community policing further represents collaboration between the police and community residents involving both the identification and solving of neighborhood problems. The ultimate goal is to identify and help eliminate those conditions that cultivate crime and threaten the quality of neighborhood life.

One of the great challenges brought particularly to poor communities today is having to overcome a variety of neighborhood ills, including higher crime, neighborhood disorder, street gangs, and other problems directly tied to high poverty, unemployment, and other conditions found in communities ravaged by high amounts of economic and social strain. Neigh-

borhood-oriented policing as a form of community policing would appear a promising remedy to such social disorder and other problems of rural low-income, inner-city, and other economically challenged communities today. Neighborhood policing has been found to function well and successfully where the dynamics of violent crime in communities have been brought to light and problem-solving strategies adopted. Elliott Currie has presented the value in applying problem-solving philosophies to some of the most important sources of community violence — guns in the possession of violent drug gangs who concentrate their presence mostly in a handful of high-crime neighborhoods. Much gun violence in inner-city neighborhoods has been reported as being defensive in nature, with the young carrying guns because they believe that arming themselves will protect them against potential assault. In a 1996 poll, two out of five teenagers living in high-crime neighborhoods reported that they carried a weapon for protection. Applying problem-solving remedies where the police will work with federal and local agencies and community organizations to disarm the young in such communities have brought relief to communities whose history had been one of escalating rates of gun violence (Currie, 1998).

Other community policing initiatives have specifically targeted the assisting of school age children to stay away from drugs and gangs. Both the Drug Awareness and Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) program, and the Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) pro-

gram found in communities throughout the United States. are educational programs to prevent drug use and violence among young people. Community policing officers involved with the D.A.R.E. program have emphasized assistance in the form of helping school age children recognize and resist the pressures from peers to experiment with alcohol, marijuana, tobacco, and other drugs (Palmiotto, 2000). Strategies focus on building self-esteem, assertiveness, interpersonal and communication skills, decision-making skills, and awareness of positive alternatives to drug use and gang involvement. Community policing officers involved with the G.R.E.A.T. program have emphasized assistance in the form of teaching young people the value of establishing goals for themselves as a means of resisting the pressures of gangs, along with educating the young on resolving conflicts without violence (Palmiotto, 2000).

Other research has pointed out the value of community policing philosophies in recognizing that youth violence, substance abuse, and other similar problems cannot often be separated from the larger social and physical environment in which they typically occur (Trojanowicz and Bucqueroux, 1990). Research has shown inner-city children to be routinely exposed, often repeatedly, to serious violence. Forty percent of sixth, eighth, and tenth graders in high-crime neighborhoods, in a 1992 survey, reported witnessing a least one violent crime in the preceding year (Currie, 1998). At the same time it is rare where a child will receive any systematic attention to offset its impact when such violence happens. Researchers have reported how exposure of a child to violence on a regular basis, including identifying with the power and excitement of delinquent and violent role models. may become a chronic hedge against feeling helpless and afraid (Currie, 1998). Community policing philosophies open up the thinking in having police officers recognize the broader context for such youth related violence. The opportunities for positively addressing the negative impact on the lives of such children through constructive social interventions is made possible as these principles are applied in addressing youthful violence and other problems tied to poverty and other adverse conditions impacting the lives of this nation's low-income and poor.

Other research reminds us likewise of youthful violence and other crime and its connections to larger social and economic forces endemic to the lives of many of this nation's poor. High rates of robbery. homicide, theft, spousal battering, and drug abuse are much more associated with high poverty areas, and with unemployed and subemployed men and other low-income persons in the nation's urban communities (DeKeseredy and Schwartz, 1996; Siegel, 2001). Such problems when born out of poverty and other social and economic strain, breed crime and other problems by denying people a sense of purpose, while simultaneously contributing to the weakening of families, and the eroding of community life (DeKerserdy and Schwartz, 1996).

The conditions of high crime, youthful violence, drug abuse, street gangs, poverty, and other problems community policing principles seems poised to address is not just an inner-city problem. Crime, violence, and poverty are also problems common to many cities and communities like Ponca City here in Oklahoma, and as well as communities throughout this state, region, and elsewhere. Small cities and rural communities experience many of the same problems as larger cities in the rates of drug abuse, crime, violence, and poverty. At the same time, small cities like Ponca City experience other problems common to larger cities, including competition between citizens for adequate housing, the widening gap between the privileged and the poor, the distrust of citizens toward the police and other public officials, much of which the latter find a cause in a public's increasing alienation tied to a growing sense of social and economic inequality.   Neighborhood police versed in community policing principles would appear a promising remedy to many such problems born out of community conditions high in the amount of social disorganization tied to economic and social strain (Siegel, 1986:194). Progressive policing initiatives today found in the application and practice of neighborhood-oriented policing philosophy would appear to provide an important complement to the traditional police effort to control serious crime and other social disorder in low-income neighborhoods (Decker, 1981; Currie, 1985:254; Kratcoski, Dukes, and Gustavson, 1992: 219; Guido, 1993). Community policing principles which hold the potential in successfully controlling crime and social disorder in neighborhoods challenged by the high incidence of social and economic strain, is brought to bear on a study of the effectiveness of a neighborhood community policing structure in a neighborhood community district in

Ponca City, Oklahoma. Several dimensions comprise this analysis for determining the program's effectiveness, including items measuring public fear of crime, neighborhood conditions, problems, and other quality of life indicators.

THE WESTSIDE NEIGHBORHOOD PROJECT

Neighborhood-Oriented Policing will describe the more specific program which is in place in this group of neighborhoods. Two Ponca City police officers are assigned to this project and operate of a community resource center known as Lincoln Center within the Westside neighborhood community. The Westside Neighborhood Community include two separate neighborhood areas: a North Area group of neighborhoods and a South Area group of neighborhoods. One officer is assigned to the North area neighborhoods, and the other to the South area neighborhoods. Major Clayton Johnson of the Ponca City Police Department describes the responsibilities of the two officers as working with merchants and residents in the project neighborhoods to identify potential problems and solutions (Johnson, 1999). A further responsibility is for developing and maintaining partnerships within the neighborhoods, businesses, referral agencies and other organizations to improve the quality of life in the project areas (Johnson, 1999). A survey of activities performed by the two police officers over an 18 month period, further illustrates their responsibilities as described above:

focus code enforcement and fire marshal resources on problem locations; dine with children in neighborhood schools on a regular basis; visit preschool and day car facilities to interact with young children weekly; provide the Municipal Juvenile Court with pre-sentence information on neighborhood youth; secure food and recreational donations from businesses inside and outside of the project area; conduct misdemeanor property crime investigations; provide mentors for neighborhood youth; enforcement of city ordinances and state statutes on a daily basis; provide tutors for neighborhood youth; plan and conduct after school and summer recreational programs; arrange neighborhood clean up projects (Johnson, 1999).

The group of neighborhoods selected for the Westside Project contained households, which in 1995 was reported as having had a very high demand for police services. Internal documents provided by the Ponca City Police Department showed Southwest side neighborhoods having reported the highest occurrence of disturbance calls (465) in the City of Ponca City for that year. Southwest side neighborhoods also had the highest burglary rate, the highest amount of prowler complaints and the second highest amount of reported fights in 1995 (Johnson, 1997). The neighborhood will include a mix of retail businesses as well as a residential area that is quite diverse. The residential property varies from apartment buildings, to duplexes to single family dwellings (Johnson, 1997). The area contains further a significant amount of rental property. Finally, an internal document prepared in 1997 reported strong evidence of a neighborhood in decay (Johnson, 1997).

The neighborhood area for the Westside Project is located in the southwest part of Ponca City and comprises about ten percent of the City of Ponca City. Businesses in the research study include all merchants owning or operating businesses in the Westside Project group of neighborhoods who elected to return surveys that were given to them for completing. Between 55 and 60 businesses were operating within the Westside group of neighborhoods over the course of the three years of the present survey. Thirty-three merchants completed and returned surveys in the 1997 year, while 25 merchants both in 1998 and 1999 completed and returned surveys. For each of the three-survey period, 160 residents were interviewed for the data and analysis generated for this study.

Survey data collected by the two authors of this research show income levels among North area residents within the Westside neighborhood district at well within the poverty range among a large proportion of residents. We found 41 percent of residents reporting annual household incomes of less than $14,000 in 1997. An additional ten percent reported an annual household income of less than $20,000 in 1997. Fifteen percent of North area residents reported being unemployed at the time of the survey in 1997. Similarly, residents living in the South area group of neighborhoods reported in substantial numbers income levels falling within the poverty range. Some 23 percent of southside residents reported annual household income of less than $14,000 in 1997. While an additional 22 percent reported an annual household income of less than $20,000 in 1997. Among South area residents at the time of the survey in August of 1997, ten percent reported being unemployed.

DATA AND METHODS

Survey interviews provided the principal research methodology. Two population pools. including residents from separate neighborhoods within the Westside community district, comprised the sample group for this analysis. For the residents, survey questionnaires were administered through face-to-face interviews carried out by the two authors and others hired as Graduate Research Associates over the first three years of the study. Data were collected over three separate periods: August 1997, August 1998, and August 1999. Systematic sampling methods were brought to selecting household respondents for interviewing for the three years. We report the findings below.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the reported frequency among a combined sample of North Area and South Area respondents on their fear of crime across the three survey years. Reductions are observed over the three years in North and South Area residents' registering of fear of crime. For table 1, personal fear of crime is down (for several indicators quite dramatically) in 1999 compared to 1997. The largest reduction is among those reporting that they are more afraid of crime than they have ever been (down to 25 percent among North and South residents in 1999, compared to 48 percent in 1997). The next highest reduction is among those reporting that fear of crime is high in this neighborhood, and that there is a good chance I will be

a victim of a property crime this year (down to 26 and 38 percent, respectively, in 1999 compared to 38 percent and 50 percent in 1997). Each of the other measures for 1999 show a reduction from 1997. Residents' fear of being a victim of a personal crime shows a reduction from 17 percent in 1997 to 10 percent in 1999. Residents' fear of going out after dark shows a reduction from 30 percent in 1997 to 22 percent in 1999. Also. five of the seven measures of fear of crime show reductions between 1998 and 1997.

Table 2 presents the reported frequency among a combined sample of North and South Area respondents on their attitudes toward the police and police services across the three years. Gains are observed in North and South Area residents' positive perception of police and police services. For table 2, perception by residents that police are knowledgeable about the needs in my neighborhood has increased to 81 percent in 1999. This is up from 56 percent among North and South residents in 1997. Perceptions by residents that they see police officers on patrol in this neighborhood, and that the police department does the best job it can against crime in this neighborhood have both increased by some 21 points to 86 percent and 81 percent in 1999, from 65 percent and 60 percent, respectively, in 1997. A large increase in North and South residents' positive perception of police and police services are also present where residents in much fewer proportions report that the police hassle people too much in their neighborhood (down to six per-

TABLE 1. PERCENT FREQUENCY OF ITEMS MEASURING PUBLIC FEAR OF CRIME BY SURVEY YEAR

	NORTH AND SOUTH RESIDENTS Percent Agree or Strongly Agree		
	1997	1998	1999
I often avoid going during the daytime because I am afraid of crime.	6	8	3
I often avoid going out after dark because I am afraid of crime.	30	29	22
My fear of crime is very high.	32	35	26
I am more afraid of crime than I ever have been.	48	35	25
Fear of crime is very high in this neighborhood.	38	28	26
There is a good chance I will be a victim of a property crime this year.	50	47	38
There is a good chance I will be a victim of a personal crime this year.	17	10	10
Base(N)	160	160	160

TABLE 2. PERCENT FREQUENCY OF ITEMS MEASURING PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARD THE POLICE AND POLICE SERVICES BY SURVEY YEAR

	NORTH AND SOUTH RESIDENTS Percent Agree or Strongly Agree		
	1997	1998	1999
I regularly see police officers on patrol in this neighborhood.	65	83	86
The police hassle people too much in this neighborhood.	23	6	6
The police department does the best job it can against crime in this neighborhood.	60	80	81
I must admit that I tend to view the police as an enemy rather than a friend.	13	6	6
My own impression of the police is that they cannot always be trusted.	31	23	14
The police are more interested in giving tickets than in solving crime.	26	8	13
MY OPINION OF PONCA CITY POLICE IS THAT THEY:			
Show concern.	73	81	88
Are generally quite helpful.	75	86	88
Are Knowledgeable about the needs in my neighborhood.	56	80	81
Puts you at ease.	67	82	84
Always exhibit professional conduct.	74	81	87
Base(N)	160	160	160

TABLE 3. PERCENT FREQUENCY OF ITEMS MEASURING NEIGHBORHOOD PROBLEMS BY SURVEY YEAR

	NORTH AND SOUTH RESIDENTS Percent Agree or Strongly Agree		
	1997	1998	1999
One big problem in this neighborhood is disorderly youth gangs and/or groups.	42	30	25
One big problem in this neighborhood is teenage crime.	50	40	39
One big problem in this neighborhood is frequent street fights and/or people loitering on corners.	29	20	16
One big problem in this neighborhood are the abandoned car and trucks.	15	13	11
One big problem in this neighborhood is poor street lighting.	40	32	31
One big problem in this neighborhood is run down buildings that are fire and other hazards.	46	38	23
One big problem in this neighborhood is litter and trash that don't ever seem to be cleaned up.	32	30	38
One big problem in this neighborhood is tall grass that don't ever seem to be cut.	40	31	20
Base(N)	160	160	160

cent in both 1998 and 1999. from 23 percent in 1997), that the police are more interested in giving tickets than in solving crime (down to 14 percent in 1999, compared to 31 percent in 1997), and that the police puts you at ease (up to 84 percent in 1999, compared to 67 percent in 1997). Each of the remaining measures shows similar increases between 1997 and 1999 in residents' positive perceptions of police and police services. The general pattern of increased positive opinions of police and police services observed in 1999 is showing a similar pattern among North and South residents for 1998 as well.

Table 3 presents the reported frequency among a combined sample of North and South Area respondents on their perceptions of neighborhood problems across the three survey years. Declines are observed over the three years in North and South Area residents' registering of neighborhood problems. The largest decline is among those reporting a big problem in this neighborhood is run down buildings that are a fire and other hazards (down to 23 percent among North and South Area residents in 1999, compared to 46 percent in 1997). The next highest reduction is among those reporting tall grass that don't ever seem to be cut as a problem (down to 20 percent in 1999, compared to 40 percent in 1997). Also, significant are the declines by residents' in problems related to disorderly youthful gangs/groups (down to 25 percent in 1999, compared to 42 percent in 1997), teenage crime (down to 39 percent in 1999, compared to 50 percent in 1997), and frequent street fights/people loitering on

corners (down to 16 percent in 1999, compared to 29 percent in 1997). Two of the other three measures for 1999 show a decline from 1997. Abandoned cars and trucks as well as poor street lighting show a decline in 1999 compared to 1997. Also, all eight of the measures of neighborhood problems show a decline between 1998 and 1997.

Table 4 presents the reported frequency among a combined sample of North and South Area respondents on quality of police contact across the three survey years. Gains are observed in North and South Area residents' perception of the quality of police contact. Perception by residents that police officers have generally cared about me as a person has increased to 80 percent in 1999. This is up from 59 percent among North and South residents in 1997. Perceptions by residents that officers who patrol my neighborhood are generally polite to me, and that police officers have generally taken their time to understand my particular problem have both increased some 16 points and 15 points, respectively, to 93 percent and 81 percent in 1999. This is up from 77 percent and 66 percent in 1997. Gains are observed as well in North and South residents' perception of police being generally helpful in matters where I have required their assistance. Further, all five of the measures of quality of police contact show gains between 1998 and 1997.

Discussion

Our research sought to determine how successful policing initiatives found in neighborhood centered policing philosophy positively

TABLE 4. PERCENT FREQUENCY OF ITMES MEASURING QUALITY OF POLICE CONTACT BY SURVEY YEAR

	NORTH AND SOUTH RESIDENTS Percent Agree or Strongly Agree		
	1997	1998	1999
Officers who patrol my neighborhood are generally polite to me.	91	93	77
Officers have generally been helpful to me in matters where I have required their assistance.	80	86	87
Police officers have generally taken their time to understand my particular problem.	66	75	81
My experience is that police officers have generally cared about me as a person.	59	74	80
I will do anything possible to work with the police to make my neighborhood a better place to live.	93	96	93
Base(N)	160	160	160

impact low-income neighborhood quality of life. Insights brought to policing strategies where neighborhood policing and other adoptions of community policing philosophy are constructed in accomplishing important community safety goals, see much promise in such principles positively impacting quality of life for low-income and other socially and economically strained neighborhood members. Policing philosophies embracing the social and environmental basis for many of the problems affecting low-income neighborhoods and residents find a promising remedy to the problems inherent to low-income neighborhoods in the broader principles of problem-solving, crime prevention, and citizen-input that have come to shape community policing philosophy and practices today.

Our findings showed the structure of neighborhood community policing to provide broad and positive effect for Westside residents in improving community members' perception of neighborhood conditions and other assessments of their overall quality of life. In the items measuring fear of crime, our findings showed an overall decline among Westside community members' perception of their risk of personal and property victimization, neighborhood general fear of crime, and other assessments of personal and community level fear of crime. Similarly, in assessments brought to community members' perceptions of police, and police services to the community, findings from the study showed consistent gains in favorable opinions regarding important services brought to neighborhood life. Further, in the assessments of neighborhood problems, the findings point, likewise, to important gains in community member's perception of neighborhood problems being successfully addressed. Finally, our study found community members to express an overall, increasingly strong positive attitude toward the quality of personal contact they usually have with the police.

The findings appear to invite the important value of neighborhood policing as containing the seeds to positively impact overall quality of life in neighborhoods besieged by significant social and economic strain. Indeed, such principles where community centered problem-solving, crime prevention, citizen input, and the placing of neighborhood problems within a broader context of social and economic disadvantages prevail, that such principles appear to contain the ingredients to neighborhood life rich in the bounty of a reassuring and highly

contented sense of strong social order and an equally highly valued neighborhood life.

In addition to this study presenting the findings of a clear benefit neighborhood policing strategies bring to enhancing neighborhood conditions and quality of life in communities where such community policing strategies have been put in place, the research contains important implications that may prove quite enlightening in facilitating the accomplishment of local goals for communities and police departments anticipating the adoption of community policing initiatives of their own. First, the pilot study demonstrates quite effectively the value that an active research monitoring of a project involving neighborhood police officers can provide. The first author has been the principal investigator in supervising several assessments of the neighborhood police officers stationed in the Westside Community District in Ponca City. The reports developed from the annual assessments have provided an important evaluation component to the administration of the Ponca City Police Department in allowing for the determination of the project's success, and for making informed decisions in regards to the future of neighborhood policing in that part of the city. Police departments and communities planning the adoption of neighborhood policing and other similar community policing initiatives would benefit immensely from having in place at the start such a structure of research monitoring, similar to the Westside Project assessment reports that have been carried out over the course of the activities involving the presence of neighborhood community policing in this group of neighborhoods.

Secondly, the pilot study demonstrates the immense importance to the successful outcome of neighborhood community policing of support among local police administrators and police personnel for the structure of an annual assessment in evaluating the effectiveness of a neighborhood community policing presence. The active support among Ponca City Police Department senior administrators, and in particular the Police Chief and Deputy Chief officials have been a key factor for the success of the neighborhood policing presence in the Westside community. The initial concept paper developed by Major Clayton Johnson of the Ponca City Police Department contained statements inviting the clear value as the Westside Project is being planned to adopt an assessment component, which will also func-

tion as one of a number of key elements central in the administering of the project (Johnson, 1997). This interpretation by the senior administration of the benefit of putting in place the structure of research monitoring of the project's success would be the basis for Major Johnson's initial contacting of my department at Oklahoma State University, and my subsequent agreement to serve this role for the efforts being planned for the Westside community in the city. Finally, the two police officers assigned to the project were individuals highly supportive of the principles and goals of citizen involvement, the establishment of community partners, problem identification, problem-solving, and other similar values brought to community policing neighborhood designs. This was also key to the success of the project.

There is an important need for this type of research in rural and small city communities throughout this region and the country as communities increasingly adopt community policing approaches to enhance neighborhood conditions and safety. The efforts in Ponca City should then stand as a model for other communities in the heartland of rural, small town, and big city America. Barriers for conducting this kind of research is obviously found in not being aware of communities having a potential to benefit from such research. Possible strategies to overcome such barriers include constructing proposals for presentation to city police administrators as well as local public officials where one clearly conveys in a an effective manner the clear benefit such research can provide for local communities in facilitating their goals to establish in neighborhood communities, a successful neighborhood community policing presence.

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