# How can police agencies implement community policing? Create specialized units!

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## 1. Introduction

Community policing is arguably one of the most discussed and researched topic in policing. Since 1970s, police agencies around the globe embraced the idea of community policing and tried to implement this new approach within their jurisdictions. Although it has been difficult to reach a consensus on the definition of community policing (Rosenbaum, 1994), many elected politicians and police leaders have not been hesitant to claim that their local governments or police departments are developing or implementing community policing programs for their people. Specifically, since American cities have recently witnessed numerous high profile cases of police use of lethal force, community members strongly argue that police agencies need to implement community policing as a part of solutions to the problems (e.g., Community Oriented Policing Services, 2015).

While not many people disagree with the significance of community policing, agencies in the US have been faced by organizational, financial, and cultural challenges in implementing the new strategy (Mastrofski et al., 2007). Thus, one important question arises: how can police departments implement community policing? Policing scholars and leaders have tried to put this new approach in practice, but there has been lack of research on this issue other than a general suggestion that "one size doesn't fit all." The current study is designed to address this gap. Specifically, it examines the effect of specialized community policing units on the implementation of community policing programs by local police agencies in the US.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Community policing in the U.S.

Police organizations in the U.S. began to accept and implement community policing philosophy since the 1970s. Now a major aspect of American policing, community policing reflected the changing relationship between police departments and society. Community policing demands that police agencies take citizens' concerns and needs into account in their daily policing activities. Thus, community policing considers the community as a co-producer of police services as well as a recipient, not as a target of policing tactics (Moore, 1992; Skogan, 2004). This new approach in policing has been hailed as an alternative to traditional policing tactics (e.g., Scheider et al., 2009).

Policing scholars and leaders, however, do not agree upon what the new approach entails in theory and in practice, or even exactly how to classify it. Some regard it as "operational approaches" (e.g., Moore, 1992) or a "new style of policing" (Greene, 2000), while others consider it as "a variety of philosophical and practical approaches" (Community Policing Consortium, 1994). Often, community policing is criticized for being a "hodge-podge" of desirable programs (Crank and Langworthy, 1996) or a "potpourri" of strategies (Maguire and King, 2004).[1]

In an effort to overcome these inconsistencies, community policing scholars have tried to identify key elements of community

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[1] The scope of this study is not to present the definition of community policing. Rather, it attempts to empirically assess the effect of CP units on different dimensions of CP activities. In fact, policing scholars and practitioners have different ideas of what community policing means (e.g., Somerville, 2009).

policing. For instance, Mastrofski and Willis (2010) provided three distinct elements: (1) community engagement in making policies and delivering services; (2) embracing problem-oriented policing approaches; and (3) organizational decentralization. Maguire and Wells (2009) also suggested three dimensions of community policing: (1) problem-solving; (2) community engagement; and (3) organizational adaptation. In short, while there have been a number of approaches to police reform effort, community policing highlights the importance of close police-community relations and operation of problem solving techniques. This community-focused perspective encourages departmental restructuring so that every rank-and-file officer can engage in community policing activities. Specifically, community policing proponents advocate despecialization of police organizations (Mastrofski and Willis, 2010). That is, police agencies should attempt to make officers generalists so that all officers can engage in community policing activities (see Maguire and Gantley, 2009).

### 2.2. Specialization of police organizations in a community policing era

Due to bureaucratization, police departments in the United Sates have undergone dramatic changes since the late 19th to early 20th centuries (Reiss, 1992). First, police departments tried to separate themselves from the influence of local politicians. Second, police agencies became hierarchical organizations, leading to an increased number of staff officers. Third, police departments introduced merit systems in hiring and promoting personnel. Last, and most closely related to this study, bureaucratization has led to the complexity and specialization of police agencies. In fact, specialization of police is characterized by the establishment of specialized units, or "specialist units," within police agencies, each devoted to a different aspects of the organization's goals and tasks (Mastrofski and Ritti, 2000).[2]

Many police agencies have used specialized units as an organizational tool that alters police officers behavior by providing diverse career opportunities. For instance, rather than riding in a patrol vehicle for a long time, officers would work hard to get a "cushy" job or to be involved in more focused tasks. For police administrators, assignment of officers to specialized units (e.g., narcotics, homicides, juveniles, etc.) is used to give an opportunity to develop officers' careers within their organizations (Walker and Katz, 2010). Wilson (1968) also maintained that operation of specialized units can show the styles of police agencies. He argued that unspecialized agencies would be likely to be "watchman" style agencies that focus more on law enforcement functions. This in turn leads to resistance of specialization of police organizations (Wilson, 1968). In short, specialization has been regarded as one of many personnel management tools.

It is worth noting, however, that police organizations are often criticized for creating specialized police units when they are faced with specific problems or are not effectively tackling local problems (Moore, 1992). Scholars have tended to regard police departments' dependence on establishing specialized units as a temporary strategy to calm criticisms related to agencies' incompetence in solving local crime problems. Put differently, creation of specialized units has been considered a transitory response to relieve public attack on police departments, rather than reflecting a result of rational organizational decision-making to increase effectiveness and efficiency (Crank and Langworthy, 1992). Despite these criticisms, it is arguable that specialized units may benefit (or harm) police departments to successfully implement community policing initiatives.

In fact, many police departments perform community policing programs through separate units specifically devoted to program implementation (Maguire and Gantley, 2009), and it is ironic that police departments have used specialized community policing units to implement various programs. That is, the philosophy of community policing calls for generalized (not specialized) police structures so that every officer can be involved in close interactions with citizens and problem-solving activities. However, the creation of specialized units committed to community policing strategies may signify that officers in the units are mainly responsible for the implementation of diverse community policing programs (Moore, 1992).

In summary, the presence of separate community policing units (CP Units) reveals the conflict between the ideal and the reality of a new approach (Weisel and Shelley, 2004) because creation of specialized units to implement community policing is antithetical to the core principles that such units are supposed to keep. Even so, not much research has looked into this issue, and it has become an empirical question to investigate the effects of specialized community policing units because of their widespread use within contemporary police agencies.

## 3. Current study

The present study investigates how specialized CP Units affect outputs of police agencies. More specifically, the goal of this study is to empirically examine how creation of CP Units alters the community policing activities performed by police agencies. CP Units refer to specialized units solely responsible for implementing community policing activities within police organizations. Therefore, the existence of a CP Unit is a key independent variable in explaining program changes in the area of community policing. Unlike prior research, however, the current study introduces three distinct elements of community policing (i.e., community engagement, problem-solving, and organizational transformation) to determine whether specialized units play a similar role in each element of community policing program implementation. Longitudinal data are also used to examine if a causal relationship exists between CP

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[2] Maguire (2009) defined specialization of police organizations as "the division of work into defined tasks and the assignment of those tasks to functionally distinct organizational units" (p. 45). Thus, it is worth noting that the term "specialization" in this study refers to specialization of *task*, not of people. Task specialization, according to Thompson (1961), refers to "making activities more specific," while specialization of people means "the adaptation of the individual to the conditions of his existence" (p. 25). In an organization where tasks are specialized, workers are not necessarily specialized only because they can perform such specialized tasks, given that workers easily can replace fellow workers.