National Institute of Justice

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Informal Information Sharing Among Police Agencies

Summary of Research by Alexander Weiss, Northwestern University

The American police system is among the most decentralized and fragmented, consisting of thousands of agencies at the Federal, State, and local levels. Whether large or small, however, these agencies need adequate, timely information to perform effectively. Of particular importance is information about changes in policy, law, and practice—including innovative ways to address problems and issues.

Two systems have emerged to meet the demands for information. One is a formal system that centers on the distribution of information by government sources and by professional organizations such as the International Association of Chiefs of Police, the Police Executive Research Forum, and the Police Foundation. Although this formal system provides enormous amounts of information to an array of agencies, another system is also engaged in these dissemination efforts—an informal network among police organizations. This study examines the informal network.

Through this informal network or system of information sharing, police planners and others contact other law enforcement agencies directly to gather information needed to manage their departments. As the study demonstrates, this system, although informal, is relatively sophisticated and frequently used by police planners. Often, these consultations with other agencies lead to the introduction of successful ideas from other communities or help to reduce the perceived risk of civil liability within an agency.

Communication survey

The study is based on a survey administered to police planners in 360 local organizations (all with 100 or more sworn officers) and 43 State law enforcement agencies between March and June 1996. The overall response rate was quite favorable—71 percent. The survey focused on seven issues:

- What agencies are planners most likely to contact when they look for information?

- What factors influence the choice of a contact?
- How frequent are these contacts?
- What is the mode of communication?
- What are the resource requirements associated with these requests?
- Are requests for information specific?
- How well are police planning and research units prepared to conduct research?

Communication patterns

The major findings of this study are as follows:

- The communication between law enforcement planners is both frequent and relatively well organized. About 40 percent of respondents contact another agency at least once a month.

- The principal mode of this communication is by telephone, but newer technologies like electronic bulletin boards and World Wide Web sites show significant potential.

- Police organizations devoted significant resources to responding to outside agencies' requests for information. The typical agency received 22 such requests (mean) per year, while a few received more than 90. On average, an agency spent 13 percent of its planning staff time preparing responses.

- Agency similarity and reputation of the organization are key factors for police planners when choosing which agency to contact. For instance, requests for information on administrative issues tended to go to agencies facing similar problems, and requests about specific topics like problem solving or gangs to agencies with strong reputations in these areas.

- Most planning and research managers believe that their staff have not had adequate preparation in the skills required to conduct research in their own organizations.

Policy implications

As this study indicates, the network of police planners is a significant resource for the police community, particularly to the extent that it facilitates the diffusion of new ideas. The informal network among police planners appears to be a critical element in the research/planning process, which may be further enhanced as follows:

- *Acknowledge and encourage the network of communication among police organizations.* While this network probably cannot replace more formal channels of communication, it is nonetheless a key component of the dissemination process.

- *Provide resources to key organizations in this network to support their dissemination activities.* Supporting this network could prove most beneficial to police and government agencies alike. For example, many program agencies in the U.S. Department of Justice disseminate copies of their relevant publications to police departments. That practice leverages the Government's dissemination efforts to the extent that the departments pass along the content of those publications through the informal information-sharing network.

- *Continue efforts to enhance the research capacity of police organizations.* In the recent past, the Federal Government instituted a number of programs designed to increase the internal research capacity of police organizations. Programs such as the National Institute of Justice's Locally Initiated Research Partnerships, which team researchers with police practitioners, are a very positive step and are consistent with the findings of this study. Additional efforts might include providing police planners with training in research methodology or offering support to professional associations serving police planning and research officers.

- *Choose sites for research and demonstration projects on the basis of an agency's prominence in the communication network.* Many police planners equate agency expertise with research experience. That is, police planners are inclined to believe that the sites of large research or demonstration projects are the best places to look for information on particular subjects. For example, the Milwaukee Police Department, site of one of the spouse assault replication projects, was cited as an organization to contact for information on domestic violence. This suggests that an agency is likely to serve a dissemination role after the project is completed. It would seem that agencies active in this network would prove to be more efficient in these dissemination functions.

- *Continue efforts to make research available through electronic media.* The study results suggest that the Internet and electronic bulletin boards could play a significant role in enhancing the police communication network, particularly for smaller agencies.

While this study was comprehensive, results indicate several additional areas of research worth pursuing. First, it is important to closely examine the nature of smaller agencies' (fewer than 100 sworn officers) participation in this informal network of police agencies. Second, it would be helpful to explore more fully the planning operations of the major departments that serve as major information providers. Such a study may reveal whether factors endemic to those units make them more attractive as information providers. Finally, it may be useful to conduct studies of the relationship between the formal means of dissemination and the informal police network.

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