POLICE AS COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS:
THE HOUSTON FIELD TEST

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

by

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SUMMARY

This report summarizes the results of a field test conducted by the Houston Police Department and evaluated by the Police Foundation under a grant from the National Institute of Justice. The project, successfully carried out from the fall of 1983 through the spring of 1984, tested the hypothesis that the development of a neighborhood organization, initiated by the police, could reduce fear of crime, diminish perceptions of local problems, and increase citizens' satisfaction with their neighborhood and with the police.

After ten months of program implementation, the evaluation found no apparent program effects on respondents' levels of fear of victimization or worry about property crime. There were, however, some other desirable outcomes. Residents in the community organization neighborhood, as compared to those in a matched area where no new programs were introduced, were significantly ($p \leq .05$) less likely to see disorderly behavior as a big problem in their neighborhood and were significantly more likely to give police service high ratings. Additionally, the approximately one-half of the program area respondents (a panel) who were interviewed both before and after program implementation) were significantly less likely to see personal crime and property crime as big problems in their neighborhood than were panel respondents in the comparison area.

THE PROGRAM

In mid-1982, the National Institute of Justice issued a request for competitive proposals to test strategies for reducing the fear of crime,

and the Police Foundation was selected to evaluate fear reduction strategies on an accelerated timetable. Two cities were selected in which to conduct the tests--Houston, Texas, a new city with low population density, rapid population growth and an expanding economy and Newark, New Jersey, an old, dense city with a declining population and a deteriorating revenue base. In each city, a Fear Reduction Task Force was created to consider possible strategies, select those which were most appropriate for the local conditions and plan and implement those strategies over a one-year period.

The Houston Police Department's Fear Reduction Task Force hypothesized that one source of fear in a large, sprawling, rapidly growing city could be a sense of "anomie" which might have at least three components:

1. a lack of familiarity with one's neighbors,

2. a sense of physical, social and psychological distance from the police who, especially in a rapidly changing environment, may bear an even greater responsibility for being the visible symbol of social control, and

3. a feeling of powerlessness caused by the sheer size of the city with the subsequent physical distance from city hall and the involvement of local government with a vast array of problems, many of which do not bear directly on the neighborhood in which any given individual lives.

In 1983, Houston had an estimated population of 1.8 million residents, which means the city had taken in from 400,000 to 500,000 new residents since the 1970 Census was conducted. In the four neighborhoods surveyed in 1983 for this study, an average of 44 percent of the respondents had lived in their neighborhoods for only two years or less. In this environment, it might be expected that many people were unacquainted with the people living around them.

It also seemed unlikely that they would be acquainted with representatives of the Houston Police Department whose 3357 members were distributed over an area of 565 square miles. Houston is a city in which almost all patrolling is done in cars. In police systems which are based almost entirely on motorized patrol, police interaction with residents and business persons is most likely to occur when police are giving tickets, responding to calls for service and dealing with criminal incidents. Lack of regular, casual contact could leave citizens--especially those who might already be feeling estranged in a new or changing neighborhood--feeling that there was no one around to define and enforce social norms, and that their police neither knew nor cared about them. These feelings might in turn contribute to dissatisfaction with the area as one in which to live, and fear of crime and other social problems.

Similarly, the burgeoning, complex demands on a physically distant city government might also cause citizens to feel relatively powerless to influence a governmental structure which was as likely to have to deal with questions of international trade as with the matter of a broken street light on a neighborhood corner.

In short, the officers hypothesized that many Houston neighborhoods might be suffering from the lack of a sense of "community," and they proposed that the police, as a stable organization in a changing city, might be able to serve as the catalyst for neighborhood organization. The task force proposed sending into the target neighborhood a small team of officers who were to become familiar with the area and its residents. They would use the information to identify residents who would be willing to host "neighbor

meetings" in their homes for the purpose of getting better acquainted with each other and with local police officers who would be invited to meet with the small groups. From these meetings, an effort would be made to identify a smaller group of residents who would meet once a month with their district police captain to discuss neighborhood problems and seek solutions which might involve citizens as well as police. The smaller group would take over, from the police who would initiate the project, the task of developing and maintaining a neighborhood organization.

As part of their effort, the police organizers would publish a monthly newsletter to be distributed in the neighborhood. The newsletter would contain general departmental news of interest to the community, safety and crime tips, and "feature stories" which would describe citizens and/or police working to prevent crimes or apprehend criminals. One section of the four page paper would focus on news directly relevant to the neighborhood, including items about the community organizing effort.*

The Police Organizers

Four police officers and one civilian urban planner working in the police department's Planning and Research Division constituted the Community Organizing Response Team (CORT) whose job it was to organize the target neighborhood. Two of the patrol officers were from the patrol district in which the neighborhood was located and the two others were assigned to the department's Community Service Division. Three were white males and one was an Hispanic male. The urban planner was a black female. All of the team members were attractive, articulate people who were enthusiastic about their task.

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*A copy and a content analysis of the Houston newsletter is available in the technical report for this project (Wycoff and Skogan, 1985a), and Pate et al. (1985) reports the evaluation of the effectiveness of the newsletter.

Program Elements

There were five formal elements of the program: a survey of the neighborhood, a series of "neighbor meetings," the newsletter, the formation of a neighborhood task force which would meet monthly with the district police captain, and the activities initiated by the task force.

1. The survey* was conducted at approximately 300 houses in the target areas by the CORT team and probationary police officers from the district station. The group made an effort to reach residents throughout the target area, although the sample was not statistically random. They asked respondents about area problems and whether they or anyone they knew might be willing to host meetings at which their neighbors and local police could discuss community problems.

2. Thirteen neighborhood meetings were held in resident homes between October, 1983 and May, 1984. Attendance ranged from six to eighteen persons, including 2-3 police officers.

3. Approximately 200 newsletters were mailed each month over a period of five months to persons whose names and addresses had been collected during the survey process.

4. From the neighbor meetings, approximately 20 residents were identified who expressed an interest in forming a neighborhood task force

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* This survey was separate and distinct from the evaluation surveys conducted in the program area by the Police Foundation.

which would meet each month at the district police station to discuss community problems with the captain and some of his supervisors. Between November, 1983 and May, 1984, each of the meetings was attended by approximately a dozen residents. During the first three meetings of this group, leadership was assumed by the captain and members of the CORT group. In January the group elected its own officers and, by April, had taken complete control of its own meetings and had assumed responsibility for arranging the ongoing neighbor meetings.

    5. The neighborhood task force organized <u>five types of activities</u>:

    a. A drug information seminar held at the district police station in February which was attended by 25 residents.

    b. A program of "safe houses" for children who would know by the designation on a front window that the house was a safe place at which to stop for assistance. By May, a total of thirty houses had been registered for this project.

    c. A neighborhood clean-up campaign conducted in May of 1984 in which neighbors gathered on a Saturday to load 125 cubic yards of trash and junk onto five city garbage trucks.

    d. A campaign to get residents to identify their property using etching pens.

    e. A ride-along program in which area residents could ride with a local officer.

In addition to these formal program components, there was an informal and unplanned element--increased police presence in the neighborhood, which

was a natural by-product of the police survey, the neighbor meetings, and other activities of the CORT group.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND ANALYSIS

Five areas, closely matched in terms of size, demographic characteristics, land use, level of crime and other characteristics were selected to be included in the overall Houston Fear Reduction Program. One of those areas was selected to be the program area in which the community organizing strategy would be implemented. The same selection procedure assigned another neighborhood to be the comparison area, in which no new police program would be introduced.

Demographic data from the 1980 Census concerning these two areas are presented in Table 1.

Design for Measuring Area Effects

At the area level, effects were examined by analyzing surveys conducted with random cross-sectional samples of residents and with owners or managers of non-residential establishments before and after the introduction of the program, both in the program area and in the comparison area. The pre-program survey resulted in 784 completed interviews with residents in the two areas, with response rates of 77 percent in the program area and 75 percent in the comparison area. The post-program survey produced 763 completed interviews with response rates of 77 percent in the program area and 78 percent in the comparison area.

Table 1

Demographic Data for Community Organizing Response Team Program and Comparison Areas

		Population						Housing Units			Occupied Units		
		Ethnicity				Age							
Area	Total	% Black	% Asian Pacific Islander	% White	% Spanish Origin	% Below 18	% 65 and above	Total	% Single Family	% Occupied	Persons Per Unit	Total	% Owner Occupied
Program Area (Langwood)	4581	18	3	58	21	33	3	2584	33	59	3.0	1528	37
Comparison Area (Shady Acres)	3690	22	-	52	26	26	15	1626	62	90	2.7	1460	39

Source: 1980 Census

Design for Measuring Individual Effects

At the individual level, effects were examined by comparing the results of surveys conducted with the same persons (a "panel") before and after the program was implemented, both in the program area and in the comparison area. Interviewing the same people twice had the advantage of allowing for controlling statistically the pretest scores on outcome variables. The disadvantage of such an approach is that inevitably only certain types of people can be found and reinterviewed the second time, making it inappropriate to generalize the results to the population of the area as a whole. There were 228 panel respondents in the program area and 183 in the comparison area. These numbers constituted 58 and 47 percent, respectively, of the program and comparison area Wave 1 cross-sectional samples.

Analysis

The area level data were analyzed using a pooled cross-sectional regression analysis in which controls for survey wave, area of residence, the interaction between survey wave and area of residence, and numerous respondent characteristics were applied.

The analysis model for the panel data is similar to that for the area (cross-sectional) data with the addition of a variable which is the pretest score on the outcome measure. The use of the pretest score provides for additional control of unmeasured differences among respondents.

Additionally for panel respondents, regression analysis was used to explore the possible relationship between program awareness and outcome

measures. And, also within the panel, regression analysis was used to probe possible differences in program impact among demographic subgroups.

The non-residential data were analyzed using one-tailed t-tests to determine whether there were significant differences in outcome within areas over time.

PROGRAM EFFECTS

Residential Respondents: Area Level (Cross-Sectional) Analyses

Area Level Program Awareness. In the program area there was a significant increase, from 13 to 28 percent, in the percentage of respondents who were aware of community meetings held for the purpose of discussing neighborhood problems; during the same period there was a significant decrease in such awareness in the comparison area. Only in the program area was there a significant increase, from 5 to 11 percent, in the percentage of respondents who had attended a meeting, and only in the program area did significantly more people (12 percent at Wave 2 compared to 2 percent at Wave 1) recall that a police officer had come to their door to discuss local problems and exchange information. More Wave 2 respondents in the program area were aware of a monthly police newsletter and of a clean-up campaign than was the case in the comparison area. In both areas significantly more people at Wave 2 than Wave 1 reported having seen a police officer in their area in the previous 24 hours.

Area Level Program Effects. The results for both the area (cross-sectional) and the individual (panel) level analyses are summarized in Table 2.

TABLE 2

PROGRAM EFFECTS FOR CROSS-SECTIONAL AND PANEL ANALYSES:
REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS AND LEVELS OF SIGNIFICANCE

Outcome Scale	Cross-Sectional Analysis		Panel Analysis	
	Regression Coefficient (b)	Level of Significance	Regression Coefficient (b)	Level of Significance
Fear of Personal Victimization in Area	-.06	.26	-.09	.11
Perceived Area Personal Crime Problems	-.06	.25	-.14	.01*
Worry About Area Property Crime Problems	-.07	.32	-.12	.08
Perceived Area Property Crime Problems	-.08	.15	-.15	.01*
Perceived Area Social Disorder Problems	-.12	.01*	-.13	.01*
Satisfaction with Area	+.05	.38	+.07	.28
Evaluations of Police Service	+.15	.02*	+.26	.01*
Perceived Police Aggressiveness	+.04	.03*	+.02	.23
Defensive Behaviors to Avoid Victimization	-.02	.44	+.02	.56
Household Crime Prevention Efforts	-.04	.72	-.14	.30
Property Crime Victimization	+.01	.87	-.07	.13
Personal Crime Victimization	-.05	.19	+.03	.47
(N)	(1546)		(409)	

* Statistically significant at $p \leq .05$.

The first and third columns report the sign and size of the regression coefficients associated with <u>living in the program area*</u> after the other variables in the model have been taken into account. The second and fourth columns report the level of statistical significance of the coefficients.

<u>At the area level</u> (cross-sectional analysis), respondents living in the community organization neighborhood, relative to those in the comparison area, had a <u>significantly</u> ($p \leq .05$) <u>lower</u> score on the measure of:

o   Perceived Area Social Disorder Problems,

and had significantly higher scores on measures of:

o   Evaluations of Police Service, and
o   Perceived Police Aggressiveness.**

At the area level, the community organizing strategy appears to have had statistically significant, predicted effects on only two of the eight attitude measures of program impact. The effects on other outcome measures, although generally in the predicted direction, were neither large nor statisitcally significant.

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*And, for the cross-sectional analysis, being interviewed <u>after</u> program implementation.

**This unanticipated outcome is difficult to interpret since, contrary to what the positive sign of the coefficient suggests, respondents in the program area were <u>not</u> more likely at Wave 2 than Wave 1 to rate police as overly aggressive. However, the reduction they registered over time on this measure was not as great as the reduction registered by comparison area respondents; hence, the negative coefficient.

There were no significant changes in either area in Victimization by personal or property crime or in Defensive Behaviors to Avoid Personal Crime.

Residential Respondents: Individual (Panel) Analysis

Individual Level Program Awareness. There was a significant increase, from 15 to 37 percent, in the number of program area panel respondents who were aware of community meetings. Over time, respondents in the comparison area were less likely to report awareness of meetings. The percentage of responents who recalled an officer had come to their door increased significantly from 2 to 12 percent in the program area, while there was no change in the comparison area.

In both areas, panel respondents were significantly more likely at Wave 2 to report having seen an officer in their area in the previous 24 hours.

Individual Level Program Effects. In the panel analysis, persons living in the program area had significantly ($p \leq .05$) lower scores on:

    o Perceived Area Personal Crime Problems,
    o Perceived Area Property Crime Problems,
    o Perceived Area Social Disorder Problems, and

had significantly higher scores on:

    o Evaluation of Police Service.

Effects of Program Awareness. Within the program area, an analysis

of the effect of recalled exposure to various program components found these statistically significant results:

    o Residents who reported awareness of community meetings had
      significantly higher scores on Evaluation of Police Service and on
      Household Crime Prevention Measures.

o Those who reported that an officer had come to their door also had significantly higher scores on Evaluation of Police Service.

o Residents who recalled having seen a police officer in the area in the previous twenty-four hours had higher scores on Evaluation of Police Service but also had lower scores on Worry About Personal Victimization than persons who did not report such recall.

Effects for Resident Subgroups. Analyses of possible differential program effects on subgroups of panel respondents found that blacks were the only demographic subgroup which experienced the effects of the program significantly differently than other groups. In general, they shared in program benefits, but to a lesser degree than whites or Hispanics.

Findings for Non-Residential Respondents

At Wave 2, as compared to Wave 1, respondents from non-residential establishments in the program area had a statistically significant lower score on:

o   Perceived Employee and Patron Concern About Crime,

and had a statistically significant higher score on:

o   Evaluations of Police Service.

There were no significant differences over time on any other outcome measures in either area.

CONCLUSIONS

Among panel respondents (those persons interviewed both before and after program implementation), the Houston Community Organizing Response Team strategy evaluated in this report appears to have been successful in reducing the extent that residents felt that personal and property crimes

and disorderly behavior were big problems in the neighborhood. The program
also appears to have enhanced citizens' evaluations of the police. There
was no significant impact on residents' levels of fear and worry about
crime.

The findings of program impact on the perceptions of the magnitude of
crime problems were not duplicated in the cross-sectional analysis.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the conclusions reached in this report, we would recommend that
other departments which perceive a need to help citizens feel more positive
toward the police and to perceive fewer crime and disorder problems in their
neighborhoods consider implementing a community organizing strategy. Based
on our familiarity with the Houston program, we offer the following
observations on implementation issues.

1. Community organizing was in this case, and perhaps usually will be,
difficult for police departments to do. The CORT staff did succeed in
organizing a group of neighbors to represent the Langwood neighborhood in
monthly meetings with the district captain, but it took three individuals
working almost full time for approximately four months to plan and implement
the strategy to the point of holding the first neighborhood meeting. This
is a high concentration of personnel on the problems of an area which
constitutes only 1/535 of the territory of the city of Houston. Few
departments would be able to focus this concentration of resources on many
areas of their city. Further, the district captain and lieutenants would
not have time to meet regularly with the 60 Langwood-type groups which could

potentially be organized in their district. To hold monthly meetings with all of them would require two meetings every night of the month.

2. <u>Community organizing was a frustrating undertaking.</u> It sometimes seemed to the people implementing this strategy that progress was made with two steps forward and one step back and, on some days, two steps back. It took considerable effort to locate and contact individuals in the neighborhood who might be willing to host meetings in their homes. After the initial contact the CORT staff would often find, when they recontacted the individual to set a specific time for the meeting, that enthusiasm had waned. People had become too busy or had decided they really didn't know their neighbors well enough to invite many of them in for such a meeting. In some cases, it was felt by the CORT group that individuals had second thoughts about inviting into their homes only casual acquaintances who would be able to observe possessions and means of access to them.

The CORT group consisted of three patrol officers and a civilian urban planner from the police department who worked on this project with very little traditional supervision. While their freedom gave them the flexibility needed to do what was initially an unstructured task, it also left them without a support system. People who do this kind of work need a "cheerleader," because they are breaking new ground and have little means of their own for judging whether they are making substantial progress. They need to work under the supportive supervision of someone who is well familiar with the frustrations of organizing work and who can guide them in methods for overcoming resistance. Despite the lack of such support, it should be re-emphasized that the group succeeded most laudably; however,

they were drained by the task and would have had very little enthusiasm for immediately starting another program like that in Langwood.

3. There probably are conditions under which the organizing effort might be easier and less frustrating for police. In addition to the potential benefit of supervision, there are other conditions which might facilitate the effort.

Familiarity with the area: The officers who organized in Langwood went into the area knowing none of the residents and very little about the neighborhood. Much of the resource drain can be attributed to the time they spent designing and administering the survey and meeting people in the area. The two officers from Community Services also perceived, correctly in our opinion, that they could not be an effective link between the area residents and the officers who normally patrolled in the area unless they themselves were integrated into the patrol district. As a result, they spent much of a month responding to calls in the project area and riding with officers who patrolled there. As they rode, they explained what they were trying to do and sought to gain the confidence of officers who might otherwise have tended to dismiss them as members of the "empty holster crowd" from downtown. In this way they also were able to identify officers who they felt could work effectively in the neighborhood meetings. To the credit of the CORT team, several officers became eager to participate in the program. All of this could have been short-circuited if the officers doing the organizing were officers who were regularly assigned to the district and who already were familiar with the target area and its residents. The CORT staff thought that organizing efforts might be aided by a system of beat

integrity in which officers would work almost exclusively in one area over an extended period of time.

Use of existing neighborhood organizations: If a neighborhood already had any existing organizations, officers could go to these to seek help in doing the organizing work. Langwood was selected, in part, because it had no such organizations; in order to test the effectiveness of the strategy, it was important to implement it in an area where there were no pre-existing or competing programs. However, this put the team in the position of having to start from scratch to identify people who might serve as community leaders. This will always be necessary in neighborhoods that have no pre-existing organizations; but, in many areas where police might have reason to want to strengthen the neighborhood structure, there will be some structure already in place, either in the neighborhood or close by, that could be called into action. This is not to argue that, in these areas, police should leave all of the work to the other organization. It was clear that there were benefits to be derived by both the police and the community from the police having to make the effort to become familiar with the neighborhood. However, such familiarity might be gained without the police having to do all of the initial work to identify local leaders.

Having a problem as the organizing focus: Langwood was not a neighborhood in which residents perceived themselves as beset by serious problems. In the 1983 evaluation pre-test survey, area respondents rated no crime or disorder as being more than "somewhat" of a problem; there simply were no big issues there. That's a grand condition if you are a resident,

but a difficult condition to deal with if you are an aspiring community
organizer. You need an issue. The CORT group was in the position of having
to motivate people to organize and then help them find issues which would
justify their organization and monthly meetings. A good beginning can be
made with an effort like the clean-up campaign, but that is a hard act to
follow without a real issue.

Having a physical focus for the strategy: The CORT team didn't have
an organizational home in the neighborhood where they were trying to work;
they didn't have a desk, a telephone, or anyone who could be assigned to
answer a phone should it ring. And there was no regular meeting space,
except the captain's office. If neighborhood activists had a convenient
means of finding or contacting their organizer-officer, the relationship
might be easier to maintain. A regular meeting space in the neighborhood
would also remove from citizens the burden of organizing meetings in their
homes. Houston's Northline Police Community Station staff began a community
organizing effort without calling it that, and as only a small part of their
broader program; but it seems to us that the presence of the station and the
easy access it provides neighborhood residents to their police officers
gives that program a better chance of enduring over time than the Langwood
program may have. In addition, the Northline officers can regularly use the
informal organization of neighbors to augment other programs which begin at
the local station. This gives the neighborhood group an ongoing reason to
remain involved and active even without a specific problem focus. (See
Wycoff and Skogan 1985b).

4. **"Permanently" organized community groups may not be the only appropriate goal of this kind of strategy.** There is an extensive literature which indicates that Neighborhood Watch and other similar groups are hard to maintain over time for some of the reasons already discussed here. Turnover of residents is another major problem. However, rather than struggle to maintain a group that gets bored with itself for lack of objectives, it might be reasonable to organize a neighborhood around a specific problem and then allow the group to become dormant, or evolve into whatever structure it tends toward, without guidance from the police, after the problem has been successfully addressed. Having once done the organizing, local officers would maintain on file the names, addresses and telephone numbers of people who had been involved so they could be re-contacted whenever their help was needed. Having once been brought together with the police in this way, residents might have the reciprocal sense that they could comfortably contact their officers if there was a problem they wanted to discuss. If there were no persistent problems that residents felt needed regular attention, the names collected during the initial contacts might be used to organize a meeting, perhaps every six months, in which residents could come together for an evening of conversation with their police officers who could give them the police perspective on local developments. New residents could be invited to meet their local officers, and all residents could discuss neighborhood concerns with the officers.

5. **Organizers should design an organizing strategy (or strategies) which would reach all groups of residents.** In interviewing residents to

identify informal community leaders the CORT team identified, and relied on, white property owners to the unintended exclusion of minority residents and renters. By relying on leaders of already established neighborhood groups, the officers in the Northline Community Station got the same result. Both programs failed initially to reach blacks and renters. If the organized structure is to serve the purpose of integrating various elements of the neighborhood and easing non-threatening neighborhood change, then a conscious effort must be made to involve representatives of all neighborhood groups. If this is not made a goal of the organizing structure, the group which the police help create may itself become a further barrier to community integration. Those who feel themselves outside this circle may come to feel that the police primarily are the police of the people represented in the organization and not of all the residents.

NOTE: Complete details of the program and its evaluation are available
        in Wycoff and Skogan, 1985a.

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