



The author(s) shown below used Federal funding provided by the U.S. Department of Justice to prepare the following resource:

Document Title: Police and the Community
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Document Number: 235601
Date Received: October 2019
Award Number: 2008-DN-BX-0005

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National Police Research Platform



Police and the Community

Wesley G. Skogan and Megan Alderden

One Platform survey was developed to gauge the origins and depth of support for community policing. In addition to their own views, this includes officer's perceptions of management support for this approach and the extent to which they think their peers in the department support community policing. Working as they do in seemingly hierarchical (but in fact highly decentralized organizations) the extent to which officers' "hearts and minds" are committed to community policing can play a role in the quality – and even the longevity – of neighborhood-oriented programs.

The Survey

The survey was conducted in 11 cities, and more than 1,230 officers participated. Survey content was drawn from extensive research in the field by Platform researchers and others, though some items were newly constructed.¹ Some communities involved were prosperous and racially homogeneous, while others were home to diverse populations and large pockets of poverty. The city in this study with the worst problem had a 2009 violent crime rate that was 16 times that of our safest city. The agencies ranged from fewer than 50 total employees to those with several thousand officers. Most respondents were working on the front line: 70 percent held the rank of police officer, and 85 percent of those surveyed held field rather than back-office assignments. Half were under age 40, 17 percent were women, and racial minorities made up 37 percent of those responding. Response rates for the survey ranged from 12 percent to 97 percent; they were highest in smaller agencies, and over all averaged 48 percent.

We do not identify particular agencies in this report, but instead focus on general trends and lessons for practice. The charts presented below illustrate some of the key findings, but they give each city only an identification number.

¹ We would like to acknowledge input from researchers Matthew Scheider and Robert Chapman at the Office for Community Oriented Policing Services of the US Department of Justice.

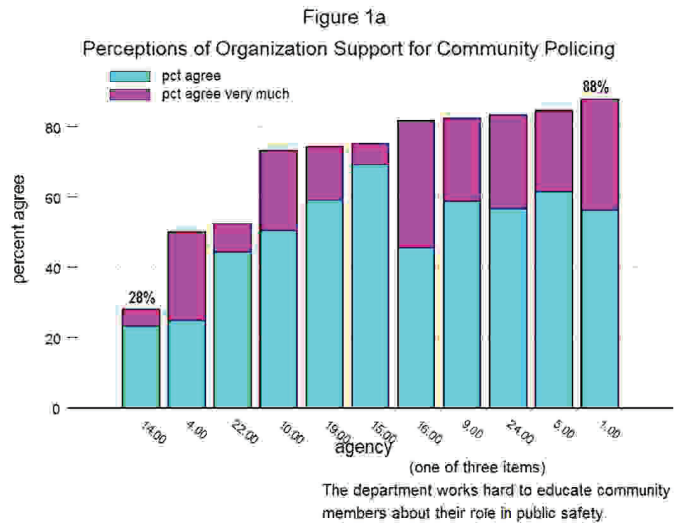
The National Police Research Platform

The National Police Research Platform was developed as a vehicle to continuously advance our knowledge of police organizations and their employees and to provide regular and timely feedback to police agencies and policy makers nationwide. In doing so, the Platform is expected to advance both the science of policing and evidence-based learning organizations. This project was supported by Award No. 2008-DN-BX-0005 awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication/program/exhibition are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

Key Findings

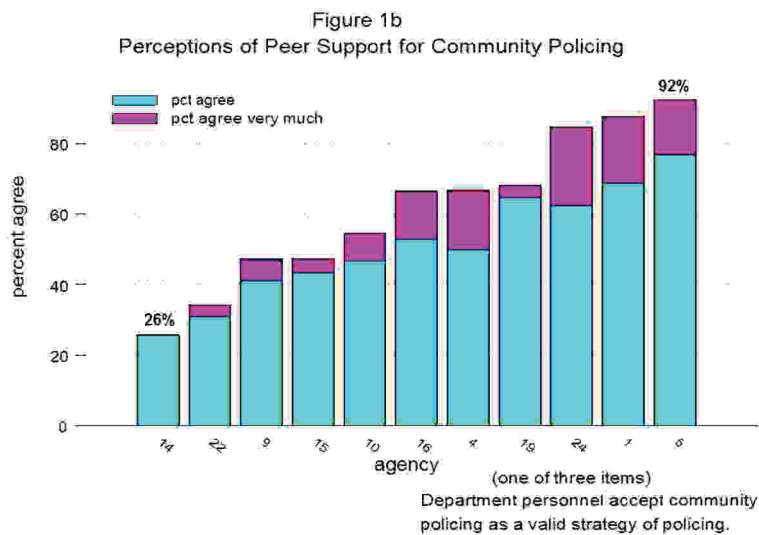
1. Agencies vary considerably in the support they appear to give community policing from the top.

Officers were questioned about the commitment of their agencies to public involvement in addressing crime and disorder problems. This support varied a great deal. Figure 1a charts responses to an example of these questions, presenting the percentage of officers who “agree” or “strongly agree” with the view that their department works hard to educate the public about their role in public safety. By this measure, support ranged across the board, from 28 percent to 88 percent. Other questions probing the commitment of the organization to community policing asked about efforts to work with citizen groups to resolve community problems and educating the public about their role in public safety.



2. There is a great deal of variation from place to place in whether officers think their peers support community policing.

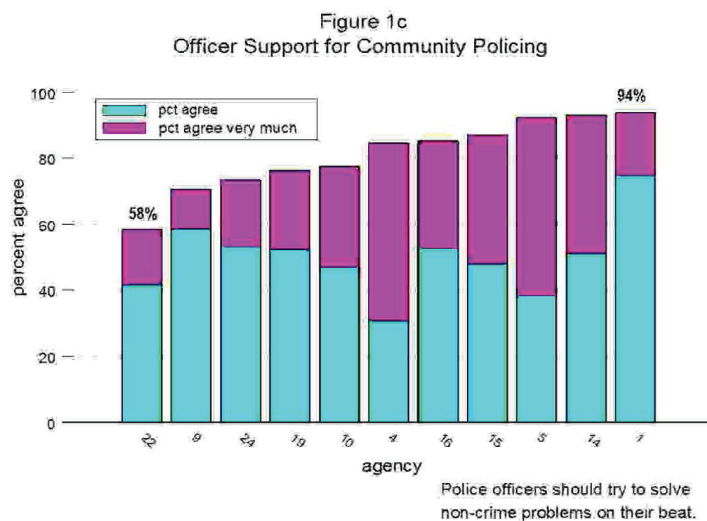
We were particularly interested in the perceptions of officers in the extent to which their peers in the department support community policing. It can be much easier to manage innovation in organizations where the “climate of opinion” is favorable toward new initiatives. Figure 1b depicts responses to one question we asked about the commitment of department personnel to community policing. Asked if department personnel “accept community policing as a valid policing strategy,” responses varied even more widely than officers’ views of their agencies’ commitment. These cities ranged from 26 percent to 92 percent thinking that their peers were behind the concept. Respondents were also asked whether there is agreement in their departments over what constitutes community policing, and if their fellow officers were working toward maintaining positive relationships with the community.



3. What officers themselves think is influenced by their perception of what their agency is trying to do and by what they think their peers will support.

The survey also included questions probing what our respondents themselves thought of community policing, with a view toward examining how this was related to factors like agency priorities and the opinions of their peers.

To gauge their own support, officers were asked whether they should be expected to make informal contacts with the community, provide a broad range of assistance to citizens, work on solving non-crime problems, and keep the public informed of their activities in the neighborhood. We found that, by-and-large, officers were supportive of these ideas, and that their personal support for community policing seems stronger than what they thought their peers would buy into. Figure 1c illustrates agency-by-agency support for the concept that “police officers should try to solve non-crime problems in their beat.” On average, between about 60 percent and 95 percent of officers agreed with this and similar questions. Note that personal support for community policing was never as low as what many officers thought their peers would support.



What accounts for this variation in support? Analyzing the data, we found that when officers thought their agency was committed to community policing and when they believed their peers bought into the program they were more likely to support the concept themselves. Agency support was the most important because it influenced officer opinion in two ways. Officers who thought their agency was firmly committed to the concept were more supportive of community policing. In addition, the view that their agency was committed to the program was strongly linked to thinking that their peers supported community policing as well. Clear agency priorities thus had a dynamic effect on officer support for community policing because (in their eyes) it was also influencing the peer culture.

Importantly, we found that size matters. When it came to support of community policing, the influence of agency priorities was stronger in smaller departments. That link grew weaker as the size of the agency grew, and in larger departments what line officers thought was more disconnected from what they thought headquarters favored.

Other factors were important as well. Within agencies, there was a disjunction between managers and the troops in the field. High-ranking officials and officers with administrative assignments were more supportive of community policing than their counterparts in the field. Sergeants stood closer to field officers than they did to higher-ups in the organization. We also found that patrol officers working in higher crime neighborhoods were considerably less supportive of community policing. African American and Native American officers stood out in their support, but many other factors were not consistently related to personal enthusiasm for community policing – including age, age when joining the force, education, gender, and prior military experience.

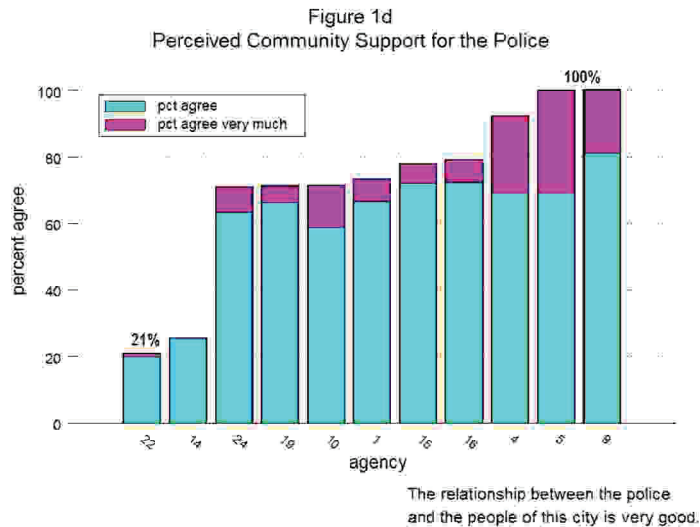
4. Officers representing the department were supportive of community policing, and by-and-large reported that positive things happen when they meet with the public.

Standing up to represent the department to the public is quite widespread – overall, more than 40 percent of the officers reported attending a police meeting with the public in the past year. We asked officers who had done so to describe the residents who attended. There is always concern that citizens who show up for meetings with the police are not very representative of the general public and its problems. However, more than 75 percent of those we surveyed reported that residents they meet with are “very” or “somewhat” representative of the community, and about 40 percent think that attendees are doing a good or very good job of working with police to solve problems.

Officers attending these meetings also think they are doing a pretty good job implementing community policing. Two-thirds thought that police are doing a good job working with residents to solve problems, and 75 percent that they are good at keeping residents informed about their problem-solving efforts. Big majorities reported that on at least some occasions they consult with the community regarding solutions for problems that they had identified, and for input in prioritizing the problems they are working on.

5. Officers in most cities feel they have the support of the public, and the more support they see the more positive they are about their department’s community policing program.

The surveys also included questions about the support officers feel they are getting from the public. Figure 1d presents the results of one question in this set, asking if the relationship between police and people of their city was good.



Officers in most – but not all – of our cities reported largely positive relations with the public, ranging upwards from 70 percent on this and other measures. Not surprisingly, perceived community support was linked to support for community policing as well. The causal link between the two could certainly run both ways, for effective policing programs can generate goodwill while at the same time it is easier to engage with and involve a generally supportive community. We often hear that police feel unappreciated by the community, but with the exception of two places that was not true for communities involved in the Research Platform. Among the nine remaining cities, 75 percent of officers reported that the public respects the police, and 80-85 percent disagreed with statements that the police and the public do not trust one another.

Conclusions and Implications

This survey illustrates how the Platform can be used to measure the extent and origins of support for community policing within U.S. police agencies. The survey is able to document

substantial variation between and within agencies that will be useful for measuring organizational excellence in the realm of community policing. Administrative and peer support for community policing seems to influence individual officers to adopt this model, although repeated measurement over time within the Platform will help to clarify cause-and-effect relationships.