Policing Disorder

What can be done about disorder? Could police be involved in dealing with some of its important manifestations? Why are they not involved very extensively in problems of disorder? The last question is particularly interesting because police were responsible for dealing with many urban problems well into the twentieth century. Police conducted health inspections, cared for lost children, checked the oil supply in street lamps, monitored merchants' weights and measures, licensed street peddlers, tracked down smells emanating from tanneries, conducted city censuses, rounded up stray animals, enjoined people from raising pigs in their yards (Hartog, 1985), and maintained the sabbath. They were accessible at all hours of the day and night in small precinct station houses scattered throughout the city. Accounts of police departments before the turn of the century describe how, in the winter months, the homeless slept in large numbers in district station houses, and police soup kitchens fed the unemployed during periodic depressions. Police dealt with crises of all kinds: missing people, lost property, health emergencies, and accidents (Reiss, 1984; Monkkonen, 1981; Walker, 1977). Police were charged with maintaining the level of order appropriate to the situation in many facets of life. "Their objective was order, an inherently ambiguous term but a condition that people in a given community recognized when they saw it" (Moore and Kelling, 1983).

Police attention to many of these problems diminished over time, and this shift, encouraged by new technology and the emer-
gence of new priorities, resulted in three major changes in how big-city police did their work. All of these changes affected their capacity to deal effectively with disorder.

The first change involved the centralization of police departments. This trend occurred partly in response to technological change. While crime control was the central function of big-city police by the end of the nineteenth century, many of the technological innovations shaping modern police organization emerged only in the twentieth. Residential telephones (widely available in big cities after about 1915) and two-way police car radios (first deployed at the end of the 1930s) blunted the impact of geography on police organization. The police no longer needed many station houses once they were motorized, and victims no longer walked to their precinct station or sought out a foot patrolman to register a complaint. Radio-dispatching shifted control of the routine activities of street officers to central headquarters. In the most technologically advanced departments, computers monitor the activity of the cars, know where they are, and quickly choose the closest vehicle available to respond to an incoming call. Other forms of police management were centralized as well. Beginning in the 1950s, a turn toward professionalism in policing put renewed emphasis on instilling discipline in the ranks, controlling corruption, and limiting the influence of the political system on personnel and operating policies. This was accomplished in part by centralizing control of detectives and patrol officers working in sensitive areas (narcotics; gambling; vice; liquor inspections), and by using personnel rotation and large new districts (encompassing many political wards) as a tool to break the ties between police officers and politicians or criminals.

The second change in policing was that departments turned their focus. A greater proportion of their time now is devoted to fighting what they define as serious crime. To be sure, they still spend a great deal of time resolving disputes, providing assistance in emergencies, and dealing with traffic problems. However, many of their earlier functions have devolved upon other municipal agencies, or have dropped from public responsibility entirely. There were a number of reasons for this. For one, by the late 1960s, adopting a "legalistic" style seemed a good way to stay out of trouble. The massive inner-city riots of the period frequently were sparked by abrasive confrontations between inner-city blacks and the police, and individual uprisings could often be traced to particular instances of curbstone justice. "Go by the book," and adopting a cool, bureaucratic demeanor while dealing with civilians was one way to defuse those tensions. Police were admonished to be even-handed, to treat everyone with the same formal respect, and to stick to the rules. The success of the legalistic style is marked by the undoubted decline in the flagrant abuse of police power in black and poor neighborhoods over the past 20 years.

At the same time, changes in the legal system may have made it more difficult to respond "professionally" to many disorder problems. Several statutes, that were routinely used to justify rounding up people, did not survive court challenges. By the mid-1970s the police could no longer make "suspicion" arrests or freely pick up "vagrants," "people loitering" on street corners, and others they wanted to clear from the streets. Many statutes which were handy for roving deviants (runaways, or as curfew violators) have disappeared from the books. In some areas local standards for making lawful arrests for street solicitation by prostitutes were very tightly drawn, leading to dramatic reductions in arrest totals; and, almost everywhere, public drunkenness is no longer a criminal offense. Departmental focusing on "serious crime" generally do not want to deal with most of these problems, and have few clear standards to act on when pressed to do so.

Another factor leading to this emphasis on crime-fighting was, of course, a tremendous upsurge in the volume of crime reported to the police. It began in the mid-1960s. In U.S. cities with a population over 250,000, the number of recorded (Part I) offenses grew from fewer than 1 million in 1960 to 2.2 million in 1970, and to 3.8 million by 1980. Police budgets expanded rapidly, but not fast enough to catch up—the crimes-per-officer ratio almost doubled during each decade, from 10 to 19 during the 1960s, and from 19 to 34 between the beginning and the end of the 1970s. The third change in policing was that managers sought efficiency in the delivery of their services. Centralized dispatching systems gave managers control over the activities of officers on the street, and over the statistical data generated from their reports. Modern administrators use activity measures and impose performance quotas to increase per-officer "output" and speed the crime-to-arrest process of their organization. They know how many minutes it takes to fill out each of the myriad forms that plague...
patrol officers, and approximately how many minutes of "service time" each kind of dispatch should take up. In their quest for efficiency, police departments even became the consumers of re-
search. Police managers wanted to know how quickly they really needed to get to crime scenes; the effectiveness of saturation patrol tactics; how detectives could clear more cases; who their "super-
cops" were; what determined whether or not a felony charge would stick in court; and whether female officers or those patrolling in one-officer cars would be as aggressive yet as safe as their counterparts. Researchers often gave them unexpected answers (see Sherman, 1986; Skolnick and Bayley, 1986), and the suspicion cast by research on many "modern" police practices helped set the stage for the emergence of new ideas about policing in the 1980s.

One consequence of these changes in the organization and mis-
sion of big-city police was a dwindling interest in disorder. Other problems always seemed more pressing. This was in part because the way they are now organized and managed means the police are most "effective" (as they measure it) at responding to com-
plaints about major crimes. As the volume of those complaints skyrocketed in the 1960s and mid-1970s, the commitment to re-
spond to every emergency call as quickly as possible absorbed most of the police resources. In effect, not the top brass, but thousands of individual citizens dialed "911," set the day-to-day agenda for many police agencies. Departments had to meet these growing demands in the face of shrinking resources, for by the beginning of the 1980s many big-city departments were smaller than they were a decade earlier. With efficiency in mind, police managers adopted call-prioritizing schemes which guaranteed a rapid response to "man with a gun," "burglary in progress," and other emergencies, but put most complaints concerning disorder at the bottom of the stack. Many stoutly resisted providing services which were not "productive"—which did not give them wide-area coverage and speed their response time, or did not generate arrests. One early victim of productivity was foot patrol.

In addition, there are seemingly few rewards for either individual officers or departments to concern themselves with disorder. Ho-
micide, robbery, and large-scale gang violence dominate the atten-
tion of the media. Virtually the only comparative and longitudinal data available by which the public can judge police success are yearly reports of the number of "Part I" crimes, and none of the incidents in that category measure disorder problems. Judges in
clogged courthouses often pay little attention to the kind of arrests that maintenance of order generates. Further, popular movements to decriminalize public drunkenness, and to trivialize the penalties applicable to minor cases of drug possession, suggest that vocal segments of the public do not support aggressive action against such misconduct. Police officers tend not to regard disorder arrests as a "good pinch." They have traditionally viewed themselves as strong and aggressive defenders of the public against the predations of vile and dangerous felons, while most disorder problems are a great deal more trivial. Sergeants smile at officers who make a robbery arrest, but those putting a drunk in the back of their car know there will just be a moan for them to clean up later.

The declining use of their formal authority to control disorder can be seen in the decline of arrests in the "big four" disorder categories: drunkenness, disorderly conduct, vagrancy, and sus-
picion. In 1960 there were 2.3 million of these arrests, and they constituted 52 percent of all non-traffic arrests in the United States. In 1985 (when the population had grown considerably) there were only 1.4 million arrests in these categories, and they made up only 16 percent of the total (Federal Bureau of Investigation, yearly statistics). Both absolutely and relatively, they appear to be paying less formal attention to major classes of disorder.

Motorized patrol, the continual shuffling of personnel from assign-
ment to assignment, and their reaction to complaints also served to isolate the police from the communities they serve. They patrol in their cars, cut off from casual contact and informal communication with area residents. Because patrol officers get most of their assignments from the dispatcher, most people deal with the police only in crisis situations or when they are themselves under sus-
picion. Police do not hear any gossip. There are few opportuni-
ties for patrolling officers to hear about neighborhood problems, as opposed to tales of individual woe, or to develop rapport with the majority of area residents who have no occasion to call for their assistance. As Samuel Walker (1983) put it, "the police lost contact with 'ordinary' people and gained a great deal of contact with 'problem' people.

Community Policing

The problems caused by police estrangement from the commu-
nities they serve are now widely recognized. A new approach to
police work, known as "Community Policing," promises to reverse many of those practices, and to repair the damage. It promises that police will be responsive to the expressed needs of the communities they serve. This is to be accomplished through organizational changes which open departments to public input concerning their priorities and procedures, coupling that with a broad, problem-solving orientation toward the issues which emerge from the process. Community Policing is currently the rage in Britain. It is that nation's major response to the racial violence which erupted there in the early 1980s (Brown and Iles, 1985). There is considerable interest in the United States as well, and elements of Community Policing are considered wherever departments attempt to innovate.

Community Policing does not focus exclusively on problems of disorder, but it is relevant because conditions of disorder could surface as a priority concern in many neighborhoods, and it might help the police do more about them. Once the public begins to play a role in defining what "important problems" are, and the police begin to define their problem-solving responsibilities more broadly, disorder will gain new attention. This was the case in Newark and Houston's Community Policing projects: they focused on such seemingly "soft" targets as fear of crime, neighborhood cohesion, social disorder, and physical decay, rather than on deterring major crimes. This emphasis was apparent both in the program-planning process and as the projects evolved in the field.

At this stage, Community Policing is not an operational "shopping list" of specific policing programs. Neither is it a particular tactical product to be adopted. Rather, it involves reforming organizational decision-making processes. It is at most a general set of guiding principles that might be implemented in a variety of ways, including those we have examined in detail. There is also a great deal of uncertainty about its practicality, and whether it reflects a too-optimistic or even a romantic view of what the public wants from its police, and the support they are willing to give them. It is also still an evolving concept. Academic thinking about Community Policing can be traced in books by legal scholar Herman Goldstein (1977) and sociologists Jerome Skolnick and David Bayley (1986) and Molly Weatheritt (1986); there are also important articles on the topic by criminologists Lawrence Sherman (1986) and George Kelling (1987). Together, they suggest that Community Policing is guided by the following principles:

1. Community Policing assumes a commitment to broadly focused, problem-oriented policing.

A key to Community Policing is a shift in orientation from "crime fighting" to "problem solving." During the post-1920 period, the police focused their attention on fewer matters. However, many of their non-constabulary functions were not picked up by other agencies. Lost from view were many problems—including most disorders—that no longer were defined as "police business." Community Policing takes a wider view of these responsibilities. Officers are encouraged to respond creatively to problems that come their way, or to refer people to public and private agencies that can help them. If they refer them to other agencies, they should follow up to make sure that something was actually done in response. This can even involve training officers in methods of identifying and analyzing problems. Police work traditionally consists of responding sequentially to individual events; in Newport, Virginia, however, and in other cities, officers are learning how to recognize patterns in incidents, converting them to "problems" and indicating something about their causes (Spelman and Eck, 1987).

2. Community Policing relies upon organizational decentralization and a reorientation of patrol tactics to open informal, two-way channels of communication between police and citizens.

Police departments are almost uniformly bureaucratic and hierarchical in organization. However, like many large organizations, police are learning that decentralization is often necessary, to allow flexibility in decision-making at the level at which the work is done. This involves granting police at the neighborhood level the decision-making power they need to function effectively. Police units need to discover and set their own goals, allocate and manage their own resources, and reward good work. Patrols need to be reorganized to provide opportunities for citizens to come into contact with police under nonstressful circumstances that encourage information to flow both to and from the organization. "The improvement of relationships with the police is the key objective of Community Policing" (Brown and Iles, 1985: 43). This justifies a great deal of foot patrol, which otherwise appears "unproductive" in terms of arrests or citations. Police also may find themselves attending PTA meetings, meeting with merchants' associa-
tions, and drinking coffee with block clubs, to facilitate this kind of interaction. Even traditionally-oriented officers can find some justification for this in the information and assistance that comes their way, and the trust that they develop in the community.

3. Community Policing requires that police be responsive to citizen demands when they decide what local problems are, and set their priorities.

In this view, effective policing demands responsiveness to civilian input concerning both the needs of members of the community and the best means by which the police can help in meeting them. This requires commitment and creativity on the part of participating officers. It also requires that a management structure be put in place that monitors requests for new kinds of service as well as the quality of the police response, to ensure that something happens. True effectiveness in responding to citizen input and actually solving problems, not just efficiency at pursuing the task, is crucial. This raises difficult management issues, for effectiveness is difficult to measure, and many of the abstract objectives of Community Policing are vague. However, they do emerge in concrete situations. The goals of Community Policing reflect theoretical notions about how the police can produce "safety," but sergeants need well-defined, specific goals to pass along to their patrol officers (Southgate, 1985). This has led to renewed interest in how to measure police productivity, some of which is reflected in the evaluations of police performance. 

4. Community Policing implies a commitment to helping neighborhoods help themselves, by serving as a catalyst for local organizing and education efforts.

Commitment to Community Policing usually goes with the belief that police alone can neither create nor maintain safe communities. Rather, they need to help set in motion voluntary local efforts to prevent disorder and crime. In this role, the police are seen as valuable adjuncts to community crime-prevention programs. These include neighborhood watch, citizen patrols, and education programs stressing household target-hardening and the rapid reporting of crime. A common (but probably oversold) justification for diverting resources away from responding to 911 calls is that community-building will ultimately prevent problems from occurring in the first place (Trojanowicz, 1986; Morris and Heal, 1981). The police can assist in this process by lending support, continuity, and legitimacy to local organizing efforts.

Community Policing has been sold in many quarters as a new and hopefully more effective way to tackle both major crimes and antagonistic relationships between the police and racial minorities. However, it probably is most relevant to disorder. Problems of disorder now are not competing successfully for the attention of the police; presumably, a decentralized and responsive police organization would take note in places where such problems are high on the agenda. Traditional police efforts do not have much impact on disorder problems, but Community Policing calls for different routines. Many types of disorder and creativity on the part of participating officers, and require efforts by other municipal agencies, or even informal collective action; police can help bring such pressure to bear by encouraging community members to act on their own, and perhaps to be more vocal in their demands on public and private agencies.

The irony is that in certain respects Community Policing attempts to turn back the clock 70 years. Of course, it only seems to, for 70 years ago police were more frequently political, corrupt, lazy, and brutal. However, it does call for at least a partial reversal of all three of the changes in policing reviewed above—toward decentralization, a broadened focus, and an orientation toward effectiveness rather than efficiency.

Elements of Community Policing now are observable wherever police innovation is taking place. However, there is little systematic evidence that the premise of Community Policing—that officers can act in defense of community norms and preserve or restore order—is true. To examine this premise, two big-city police departments participated in an evaluation project supported by the federal government. They fielded programs designed to test the effectiveness of Community Policing in difficult urban settings. We will now examine those programs as well as their impact.

Policing Disorder in Houston and Newark

The programs were tried out in Houston and Newark, in communities that are part of the 40-neighborhood survey. The two cities are extremely different. Houston is large, both in population...