Ideas in American Policing

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Policing For People

By Stephen D. Mastrofski

Ever since Americans first formed full-time public police forces, they have busied themselves improving them. Improvements come in all shapes and sizes, but reform movements are energized by big, ambitious goals. Community policing is the current catchword for reform, and it too embraces a number of ambitious goals: reducing crime and disorder, calming fears about threats to public safety, reducing the public's alienation from social institutions once thought to engender a common sense of purpose. Reformers usually present these objectives as the ultimate end-product or *bottom line* of what public police are all about. As important and intriguing as these objectives are, they are not my topic. But I begin by mentioning them

because I think that we often plant our gaze so firmly on the grand objectives that we sometimes overlook the little things we can do to improve social institutions such as the police.

I get anxious when people talk about *the* bottom line in policing because that perspective makes it easy to forget that our system of government requires a balancing among competing and sometimes conflicting goals. To contribute to that balance, I will focus on the processes of policing, which receive little reform attention but which deserve equal billing. These processes involve the more mundane aspects of police work, what police do when they police for people. I will consider what policing for people is, and could

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be, in terms of service to people. To begin, I identify six characteristics that Americans associate with "good service" from their police, adapted from a general characterization of service quality in the private sector (Parasuraman et al., 1988). I will then turn to some evidence on how well American police are providing these services, and will conclude with a reform agenda that promotes policing for people.

What Policing for People Means

Attentiveness is the first element of policing for people. Americans want their service providers to pay attention to them. Putting 100,000 more officers on the street has appeal because it increases the capacity of America's police forces to be more attentive. It is now fashionable to denigrate preventive patrol and reactive policing, but they remain popular because Americans want police who are "around." What appeals to the public about community policing is the promise that outreach programs will increase the public's access to the police. Neighborhoods fight to keep their community policing officers not just because they grow fond of the individuals, but because their presence demonstrates the department's commitment to serve them.

Reliability is the second element of policing for people.

People expect a degree of predictability in what police do. They want service that is timely and error-free. McDonald's succeeds not because the cuisine is superb but because the food is predictable and more-or-less error-free. When it works well, 911-service is like McDonald's. It is not a five-star restaurant, but it provides service fast, fulfilling basic "people-processing" needs to deal with problems immediately (Mastrofski and Ritti forthcoming).

People also want *responsive service*. Americans expect more of their police than mere adherence to bureaucratic rules (Bordua and Reiss 1967, 297). They expect "client-centered" service. This can mean giving clients what they want, but clients themselves often construe it more broadly. A good-faith effort by an officer is often appreciated as much as a favorable outcome. Citizens are delighted, and often surprised, when their police see a job through to completion, checking back later to see how things worked out. Police can be responsive even when they deny a

citizen's request, by explaining the denial. G. K. Chesterton observed, "Many a man would rather you heard his story than granted his request." And sometimes about all the police can do is "pick up the pieces" after some traumatic event. When citizens are traumatized, whatever else police might accomplish, it costs little to offer some measure of comfort or reassurance.

The public wants *competence*—service providers who can get the job done. When you get your car repaired, you expect the mechanic to know what he or she is doing. When you call the police to report a theft, deal with a domestic disturbance, or quell a noisy party next door, you expect the responding officer to know how to deal with the situation. The public judges police competence primarily in terms of the tangible things they can readily observe. They do not use crime statistics or other so-called outcome measures. They watch the officer at work and make judgments about his or her ability to get the job done.

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How the average citizen defines police competence may be different from how an experienced and skilled police officer defines it. The popular view on these differences is that they are a mile wide. Police regard the public as ignorant and ill-informed about what constitutes good police work, while the more alienated among the public regard the police as poorly trained and lacking motivation to do what the taxpayers define as good policing. These differences may be overstated, and where they do occur they may do so in unanticipated directions. For example, the vast majority of the American public approves of police striking a citizen who attacks an officer with his fists, and about two-thirds approve of a police officer striking a citizen who tries to escape custody (Maguire and Pastore 1997, 132). Very few approve of a police officer striking a citizen in response to vulgar comments or when questioning a murder suspect. I would not be surprised to see a similar distribution of responses if these questions were put to a national sample of police officers.

Where citizens may differ most from police in assessing police competence is in overestimating officers' capacities, both in terms of their legal authority and their ability to mobilize resources. Where such differences do exist, rather than merely lament them or try to convince one side that the other is right, we should encourage discussion and debate, which will probably do a great deal to enlighten people of all viewpoints. Further, it may be most productive to consider domains of police competence that are not commonly expected by either the police or the public. For example, police skill in helping crime victims might be defined not just in terms of bringing the offender to justice but also helping victims reduce the risk of future harm (Herman 1998).

An essential element of quality service is having proper *manners*. Studies show that a bad manner is among the most frequent complaints citizens have about their contacts with police (Skogan 1994, 33; Walker et al. 1996, 102). Studies also show that the most powerful predictors of citizen satisfaction with the police have more to do with how police treated the citizen, rather than what the police accomplished (Skogan 1994, 31). Social scientists have repeatedly demonstrated that when police are nasty to the public, the public is more likely to be nasty in retaliation, despite citizens' tendencies to defer to the officer's authority and status (Reiss 1971, 144; Sykes and Clark 1975). Finally, for those concerned about reducing crime and disorder, a number of studies show that citizens are more likely to obey the law and less likely to be disorderly or violent in the

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future when those who enforce the law do so in a manner that is not disrespectful (Mastrofski et al. 1996; Paternoster et al. 1997; Tyler 1990).

The final element of policing for people is *fairness*, particularly important for public officials whose special trust is to apply a wide range of powers to enforce the laws and maintain peace. Tom Tyler (1990; 1997) found that citizens who perceived that they were treated fairly by legal officials, such as the police, also reported a stronger inclination to obey the law in the future. The factor having the greatest impact on people's feelings about law and legal authority was their perception of a fair procedure, an impact substantially greater than that of the citizen's sense of the favorableness or fairness of the outcome. Tyler found that the most important elements of procedural fairness were people's trust in the authorities' motives,

treating citizens with dignity and respect, a sense of decision-maker neutrality, and providing citizens with an opportunity to participate in the decision. Studies focusing on police have supported Tyler's research (Mastrofski et al. 1996; Paternoster et al. 1997).

How Are We Doing?

These six criteria—attentiveness, reliability, responsiveness, competence, manners, and fairness—illuminate the service aspects of policing and constitute what I have termed policing for people. These criteria are not new, and we pay lip service to them from time to time, but there is very little in the current police reform movement that promotes these ideals and that gives them the attention they deserve. Virtually all of the federal dollars supporting nationwide collection of data on police performance go to measuring crime, victimization, and fear of crime. In 1996, Congress commissioned a comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness of the $3 billion given out each year by the U.S. Department of Justice to prevent crime. No such evaluation was sponsored for the criteria discussed above. Some high-visibility police leaders preach the gospel of crime reduction as *the* "bottom line" when it comes to figuring out who is doing a good job and who is not. It would be valuable if they became equally energetic

about policing for people. Finally, researchers and scholars have devoted most of their attention to assessing whether community policing reduces crime, fear of crime, and assorted disorders, but, by comparison, research outlets display very few pieces about policing for people.

One might presume that this lack of interest is a reflection of the high standards to which police in the United States already perform. Perhaps in comparison to police of many other nations, American police perform well. And in recent years Americans express more confidence in the police than most other social institutions, such as the Supreme Court, public schools, and churches. Nonetheless, they note considerable room for improvement (Maguire and Pastore 1997, 117, 119). A 1997 Gallup survey found that 61 percent of white Americans had "quite a lot" or "a great deal" of confidence in their local police. The remainder had only "some" or "very little" confidence. Only 39 percent of African Americans had "quite a lot" or "a great deal" of confidence in the police. So, a substantial portion of the white population sees room for improvement, and an even larger portion of African Americans see it that way.

Public opinion surveys do not tell us what police are actually doing in their daily interactions with the public. However, data from systematic field observations

of police are available that provide specifics about performance in policing for people. Such studies have been conducted on American police on an irregular basis in a few communities since the 1960s. They are few in number, so the findings should be taken as suggestive, not necessarily generalizable to all urban police. What follows are some illustrative examples from these data.

I have suggested that when police comfort citizens, they are being responsive to them. Citizens who have been traumatized in some way—who are injured or ill, assaulted, emotionally upset, or mentally ill—may be especially needful of comfort and reassurance from the police. Data from the Police Services Study, conducted in 1977 (Caldwell 1978), show that 26 percent of citizens who were thus traumatized were comforted by police. The Project on Policing Neighborhoods (POPN), conducted twenty years later (Mastrofski et al. 1998), shows in a different sample of urban departments that about 31 percent were comforted. The severity of traumas in both data sets had a wide range, suggesting that the intensity of need varied as well. Nonetheless, there appears to be ample opportunity for increased responsiveness of this sort in urban America.

Levels of police disrespect toward the public may have remained fairly stable over recent decades. Data from Reiss's 1966

study for the President's Crime Commission produced an estimate identical to that found in POPN thirty years later. Police showed disrespect to nine percent of suspects in both studies, disrespect being defined as making belittling remarks, ignoring questions, a loud or interrupting voice (except emergencies), or obscene gestures. By far the most powerful predictor of police disrespect was a citizen being disrespectful first. But even taking that and many other features of the participants and the situation into account, police were substantially more likely to disrespect low-income citizens than higher-income ones. The disadvantaged appear to receive a disproportionate share of police disrespect.

I have argued that police can be responsive even when they deny a request: they can explain why they declined to fulfill it. POPN data show that citizens initiated a variety of requests, such as arresting or controlling another citizen, personal assistance, and the filing of an official report. More often than not, the police fulfilled these requests (Parks et al. 1997; 1998), but what is interesting is what happened when the police denied them. In about one of every four denials, the police ignored the request entirely or refused to explain why they denied it. This kind of unresponsiveness undercuts the legitimacy of the police, making

it all the more difficult to establish the "partnerships" with the community that are the hallmark of community policing.

A final example turns to attentiveness. A crude measure of attentiveness is the amount of time officers spend with citizens. The more time spent, the more attentive they can be to that situation. In one of the departments studied by POPN, I examined police contacts with citizens who were in conflict with another. The disputants were at a stage of at least agitated verbal disagreement. The amount of time spent with each of these citizens ranged from 2 minutes to 3.5 hours. The median was 23 minutes.

Consider one of those situations that took only a handful of minutes. Two officers were dispatched to a domestic conflict. They arrived at the home and found a man and a woman engaged in a brawl. The officers told them to stop, which they did temporarily. The officers did not ask what the fight was about; they merely told the man

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and woman that they should not fight. Then the two adversaries blamed each other for starting the fight and recommenced the donnybrook. The two officers looked at each other, shrugged, and left the scene while the man and woman were still screaming and hitting each other. By any reasonable standard, this is an example of bad police work: police declined to maintain order, protect individuals, and enforce the law. There were many disputes that were much less extreme, where there was only some unknown potential for future danger and disorder, where there was no basis for an arrest. Sometimes police just defined these situations as unworthy of any further attention. More often, a cursory warning or casual referral is all the disputants received. But people summon police to these situations precisely because they want help with their problems. They want to avoid having to call the police after the situation has become bad enough to warrant an arrest. They want the police to do more than ask a

few questions or give a casual warning. They want officers to spend time with them. This is not "babysitting"; it is service.

I do not propose establishing a one-size-fits-all standard for the amount of time that officers should spend with citizens. But police and police researchers need to inquire further into just how much time officers spend on various problems, what they do with that time, and what the outcome is. If nothing else, doing so will help us examine the implications of our priorities. Does it make sense for officers to spend hours completing traffic accident reports while spending only minutes quelling minor domestic disturbances?

An Agenda for Reform

How might we advance policing for people? There are many things that federal agencies and professional associations could do at the national level, but I will concentrate on local initiatives. Unlike the problems of reducing crime and disorder, the biggest obstacles to improving policing for people are *not* technical ones. We do not need lots of new research to determine how to be more attentive, reliable, responsive, competent, well-mannered, and fair. To be sure, we could use more inquiry on these topics, but the challenge is less how to do these things than to figure out how to get police to do them more often.

The principal challenge facing policing for people is organizational, not technical.

Some of the favorite nostrums for improving policing do not have good prospects for promoting policing for people. When a police force undergoes a crisis of confidence about abuse of force or unfair treatment, a usual first step is to bring the community into deliberations about what to do. Occasionally this results in some institutionalized form of community involvement, such as advisory councils or civilian review boards. These are measures that may be essential for repairing the legitimacy of the police. But they have limited or unknown value for changing their practices (Walker and Kreisel 1996, 68) because the most daunting challenges come from within the police departments.

Internal accountability is a key element in promoting policing for people, but many of the popular measures to strengthen it are of dubious value. A fashionable response is to create or revamp the organization's mission statement. There may be no harm in this, except that it drains energy from more meaningful reforms. Changing the department's mission statement is like changing the name of items on a diner's menu. One can assign French names to blue-plate specials, but if the same cooks are slinging the same hash, it is still just a diner.

Another approach is to create new rules requiring that officers be kinder, gentler, more attentive, and so on. In some cases, making or revising rules can be a useful way to come to grips with the challenges of defining, measuring, and promoting policing for people. Far too often, however, rules are better at minimizing civil liability than producing better policing. Most departments already have plenty of rules on the books. Los Angeles had rules forbidding verbal abuse of citizens, but the Christopher Commission documented that those rules did not prevent frequent racial and ethnic slurs.

What about training? That too is a popular but overworked cure for just about anything that ails the police in America. Training can be very useful when trying to give officers new skills, but it is decidedly ineffective in changing officers' attitudes and motivations. Much of what passes for training today is really an attempt at imparting a new belief system or a new faith, what Michael Buerger has recently termed a "Pentecost" (1998). Much of the content of training on cultural sensitivity, handling domestic violence, and community policing fits this description. A few days of indoctrination in the new values espoused in these types of courses will not alter fundamental beliefs that have been percolating over a lifetime and beliefs annealed in

the work environment of the police.

Training officers to police for people is not a waste of time, but we should be careful about what kind of training we provide. Officers are far more receptive to training that tells them what to do than to training that tells them what to believe. Departments must still persuade officers to use and develop the skills imparted by the training, but that is best done by showing them how it will accomplish things they already care about. Trainees are more likely to give new methods a try if trainers can demonstrate that their job will be easier—such as less resistance and a lower likelihood of a repeat call to this address. Police officers are rightfully skeptical of new methods, so it pays to have techniques that have actually been tested and shown to work.

Training will also be more credible if highly respected officers try the new techniques and are given an opportunity to testify and show their colleagues that they work.

The most promising ways to improve internal accountability that would promote policing for people were proposed by Albert Reiss nearly three decades ago (1971, 201). They have not been widely implemented, but they deserve a try. One system of accountability to which Reiss paid attention is the department's record-keeping system. He noted that because most department records rely upon the *officer's* account of what happened, the officer's reports are likely to avoid information that discredits him or her. This, of course, is the problem with any self-report system used to evaluate the performance of the reporter.

We might push a bit further here and recognize that self-report records can also serve as guides and reminders that actually reinforce the organization's objectives about policing for people. In a recent book, Richard Ericson and Kevin Haggerty (1997) show how report forms "walk" officers through such incidents as taking a theft or burglary report. These reports structure what officers look for in these investigations, and they structure what they do.

Unfortunately, American police organizations remain virtually blind about what their police do in response to incidents that are not classified as a crime or a traffic accident. At best, the department learns from its computer-aided-dispatch records something about the time, location, and nature of the complaint or problem. What the officer did remains a cipher unless an arrest was made, a citation was issued, or a crime report was filed. An officer who quells a noise disturbance or a domestic dispute without a citation or arrest merely calls in "all-clear" or "warning given." This is like a hospital that documents only surgery and drug prescriptions.

There are many other aspects to treatment that need to be recorded.

Suppose instead that the police department had a more extensive checklist of activities relevant to a given type of incident. This would not get around the problem of officers sometimes misrepresenting what happened, but it would serve as a constant guide and reminder of decision options about policing for people that the organization wants the officer to consider. And, whatever the officer reports, it provides a much stronger record to hold the officer accountable for decisions made. Thus the kind of "medical chart" that Lawrence Sherman (1998) proposed for tracking the treatment of crime victims in his "evidence-based policing" model could be extended to the much broader array of citizens who come into contact with the police.

This checklist information could be incorporated into a form of documentation that facilitates both internal and external oversight of the police. Reiss (1971, 204) suggested that police routinely provide citizens an official "receipt" to document virtually all substantive contacts with the public. Such a receipt could include key particulars of the contact: the citizen's name, date, location, reason for the contact, and actions taken by the police. The receipt would also provide the citizen with the

control number the department will use to track this information and whom to contact with questions or concerns about it. In most departments, citizens are routinely provided such information only if they are issued a traffic citation or are involved in a traffic accident. The receipt makes the officer readily accountable to the citizen, since the citizen may dispute immediately any information that seems incorrect. It also provides the department with a means to track such contacts, much as departments use prenumbered traffic citations.

Even if police agencies improve their own systems of record keeping and data gathering, policing for people also requires meaningful external oversight. To overcome the limitations of collecting data on their own performance, private sector corporations are required to use external auditors to certify the accuracy of their performance claims. Police agencies should do the same when it comes to policing for people. Most departments publish statistics on complaints filed against officers. The information on complaint and investigation records has obvious relevance for many aspects of policing for people, but inevitably the complaint review and processing system is suspect unless there is continuous, unbiased, and independent oversight of this information (Walker 1998). Sherman (1998,

12) recently noted the need for routine, independent auditing of police departments' crime data. Many years ago, Reiss (1971, 195) suggested that an auditing bureau independent of the police agency could help both the police and the community obtain an accurate, comprehensive picture of how the police treat the public. It would supplement, not supplant, the police department's own information-gathering about policing for people, and it would serve as a check on the comprehensiveness and accuracy of police data.

Extending this idea, an independent auditor would also be a good way to learn more about how the *public* treats the police. The most powerful determinant of how the police behave toward citizens is how the citizens themselves treat the police. Citizens are more inclined to disrespect the police than vice

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versa (Parks et al. 1998, 2–41), so one way to produce a more civil police is to get citizens not to disrespect them. Police could contribute by learning more about what makes citizens behave in ways that invite police behaviors that are ill-mannered, inattentive, and unresponsive.

Auditing agencies should not be creatures of government. They, like business auditing firms, should be autonomous, staffed with professionals whose sole task is to provide information and make disinterested judgments about the quality of police data, and to provide independent data on how well departments are policing for people. These could be both profit and not-for-profit corporations, staffed with social scientists expert in the field. Auditing firms should be certified by an appropriate national professional association.

Services that auditing firms could perform for police agencies include random checks of department records about police-citizen contacts to make sure that receipts for citizen contacts were being entered. Auditors could draw a sample of receipts from department archives and also conduct "backward records checks" from a sample of citizens who reported having contact with the police. In addition to checking the accuracy of these records, the auditors could obtain additional information from the citizens about their perspective on the

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quality of service they received. It would also be beneficial to debrief officers about a sample of their contacts with the public. Doing so would enable the auditors to provide the police with valuable information about emerging patterns of potential problems in and opportunities for police-citizen interactions.

Auditors might also target certain groups of citizens for special attention. One such group is arrestees, whose legal status places special responsibilities on the police for the protection of their person and rights. Arrests are, of course, among the most risky situations for police injury. Auditors should learn as much as possible about what happened, even from the citizen's perspective (Garner et al. 1996). The National Institute of Justice's ADAM system for drug use monitoring debriefs arrestees at the booking facility. It is a clear demonstration of the feasibility of this approach to learn about

more than just drug use. Juveniles and "street people" also constitute groups that may in some jurisdictions be special targets of police attention. As well, auditors may help the community learn a great deal about the policing of these special populations by sampling them.

The auditing firm should guarantee confidentiality to all of the people it interviews. Information on individuals should not be available to anyone but the auditing firm. The firm must be able to maintain its confidentiality guarantee even in the face of management's requests and the courts' desire for inside information in a given case. There are already formal mechanisms available to obtain that information for disciplinary and legal purposes in individual cases. There is no point in the auditor merely replicating that process. The confidentiality guarantee increases the accuracy of the information by reducing

the inherent incentive of police and citizens to misrepresent their recollections. Besides, the purpose of these audits ought not to be rooting out individual wrongdoing and ineptness, but rather identifying overall patterns in performance (Reiss 1971, 195). The goal is to improve policy and thereby improve performance generally.

Auditing agencies should periodically issue reports that provide the police and the public with a variety of readings on the department's performance on the various dimensions of policing for people. The reports should also illuminate the challenges and opportunities presented by the public to the officers who must police them. Just as when crime statistics are periodically reported in the press, the publication of the auditor's report would be the occasion for public discussion of how the police—and the public—are doing in quest of policing for people.

Conclusion

I have suggested that we are in a time when aspirations about what the police might become are running high. I have argued that we should take advantage of these times to promote a style of policing that gives the people what they want. Adlai Stevenson once noted, "Your public servants serve you right." If we want our police to serve us right, then we are obliged to illuminate,

articulate, and continuously reinforce what it means to police for people. In an earlier era, Jimmy Walker, mayor of New York, defined a reformer as "a guy who rides through the sewer in a glass-bottomed boat." Contemporary skeptics may also construe policing for people as naive, far removed from the needs of crime-plagued American communities. They may argue that, more than anything, the public wants safe streets and homes, not kinder, gentler, more service-oriented officers. "Law and order" and "crime control" have been at the top of the police reform mandate for the last thirty years, but during that time very few police chiefs have lost their jobs because crime rose. Chiefs are far more likely to lose their jobs, and police agencies more likely to damage their reputations, when they fail to police for people. That is a very practical reason for top administrators around the nation to lead the way to improve their agencies' capacity to police for people.

Bertrand Russell said, "All movements go too far." The current menu of popular police reforms does not go far enough. The reforms I have supported here are not new ideas. They have been around for decades and have great merit, but they remain untested by police. Now is the time to try them.

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