

# COMMUNITY ORIENTED POLICING: IMPACT ON LOW INCOME OR PROJECT HOUSING RESIDENTS

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## Abstract

Many law enforcement agencies nationwide have come to envision the community-oriented policing concept as the future of law enforcement, and are implementing this program with varying degrees of commitment of personnel and equipment. This research was conducted to determine the measurable impact Community Oriented Policing has within the state of Florida, specifically on the residents of low-income housing projects and their adjacent neighborhoods. Flagler Village, a low-income development centered in St. Johns County, Florida, was chosen as the focus of the study, with a two (2) block radius of the surrounding residential neighborhood included in the target area.

## Introduction

The St. Johns County Sheriff's Office embraced the community oriented policing concept in April of 1995. This introduction was met with varying degrees of acceptance. A common thread of confusion and misunderstanding was prevalent throughout the ranks of the Sheriff's Office. Some commonly overheard comments were:

- "That's just another name for what we've been doing for years."
- "The people we deal with don't even know or care that we have a C.O.P.S program."
- "Since we began the program I answer more calls than ever."
- "What happens to the program when the grants run out?"

These comments and apparent confusion led to the selection of Community Oriented Policing as a research project to assist in establishing a viable community policing program for the St. Johns County Sheriff's Office. Guidelines for Police Chiefs (Trojanowicz, 1996) and Reengineering The Criminal Justice System (Woods & Ziembo-Vogl, 1996) were studied to better understand community policing. After reviewing the articles, it was obvious that the topic of community policing was too broad and cumbersome to examine in its entirety for a research project that is limited in time and space. The area of research was refined to determine the measurable impact community policing has had on the residents of low-income housing projects and their adjacent neighborhoods. Locally, residents were polled to determine awareness and effectiveness of the community-oriented policing program. To support the results, other Florida law enforcement agencies were surveyed to verify whether the results of the survey were just local phenomena or statewide norm. Conclusions would help determine if continued expenditures in personnel and resources were valid for the future.

## Background

In the late 1960's, Florida's law enforcement community was focused on actively enforcing state and federal statutes, with little effort put into community awareness or

concern. In the early seventies, the state was beginning to realize the need for a new and better way to accomplish the primary mission, as well as addressing the need to improve the overall quality of service. Thus begins the evolution of the present day Community Oriented Policing programs that are firmly entrenched in the St. Johns County Sheriff's Office today.

The first step towards that goal in St. Johns County was taken by Sheriff D.W.Garrett who resided in office from 1970 to 1980. Sheriff Garrett appointed a deputy to work full time in one elementary school as a uniformed deputy (Youth Resource Officer). Today there are 13 officers working among all the schools within the county. In 1973, in an effort to get the youth of the community more involved in learning about law enforcement officers, their duties and responsibilities, he received a charter from the Boy Scouts of America to begin the first of four Law Enforcement Explorer Posts in St Johns County. The effort to involve the community was continued by Sheriff F. M. O'Loughlin upon his election in 1980. He added additional community programs, such as the Merchant Patrol during the Christmas season as well as a Crime Prevention Unit.

When Sheriff N. J. Perry took office in 1985, he saw the need to continue this community involvement, and as a result of his efforts, the programs were expanded and upgraded. He added a Victim Advocate position and the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP). In 1991, Sheriff Perry made the decision to implement community-oriented policing throughout the agency, and encouraged his division level staff to adopt and practice the policy throughout the agency. In April 1995, the Sheriff's Office applied for the "COPS Ahead" grant through the U.S. Department of Justice. Three people were hired to fill the awarded positions, thereby making the St. Johns County Sheriff's Office a Community Oriented Policing agency in practice as well as theory.

Sheriff Perry set the sights of the C.O.P.S. program on a low-income housing project named Flagler Village. This development is in an area known locally as the "West Side ," on land west of the corporate city limits St. Augustine Florida. Flagler Village was built in 1969, and consists of seven two-story buildings, comprising 76 apartments. The complex is a federally funded Section 8 Project based housing complex, with a continual occupancy level of 100%. The surrounding neighborhood consists of 252 single-family, single-story residences, as well as several minority-owned businesses.

Flagler Village and the "West Side" display all the signs of urban blight due to years of neglect and apathy. Children play barefoot on streets littered with broken bottles and household garbage. Grass-covered yards are non-existent, windows remain broken, houses go unpainted, and unoccupied structures are vandalized, burned and left as a reminder of the hopelessness for all to see. To counteract the decay of the area, Sheriff Perry chose to base the C.O.P.S. program in the heart of the problem by opening and operating it from an apartment in Flagler Village where drug dealers and gangs once operated in relative safety. They intimidated and preyed upon the residents as a means to reduce law enforcement effectiveness. It is from this foothold that the real success or failure of the C.O.P.S. program will be determined.

## Methods

A survey was designed and implemented to obtain direct input from the target area as well as from other agencies statewide (see Appendix A). By comparing these results, useful information could be gained to gauge whether community-oriented policing was working. To accomplish this task locally, fifty field interviews were conducted utilizing the Sheriff's Office RSVP volunteers. The residents of the Flagler Village housing project and the target area were asked ten pre-selected questions. The purpose of the interviews was to measure two primary areas:

Community awareness

Program impact or effectiveness

Surveys were also mailed statewide to each of the 67 sheriff's offices in Florida to determine if other jurisdictions had established a community-oriented policing program established. If so, the survey helped determine the awareness level in the community, the increase or decrease in calls for service, the total impact of the program, and future plans to continue or expand existing programs.

## Results

Of the 67 agencies polled, only 24 responded to the survey (see Appendix B). Of the 24 that responded, 21 (87.5%) stated they currently employed some type of C.O.P.S. Program. The remaining three (12.5%) indicated they did not.

Those agencies having a Community Oriented Policing Program reported the following information:

### A. Community awareness of the C.O.P.S. Program

One hundred percent of the responding agencies indicated their communities were aware of their respective C.O.P.S. Program and received positive feedback from the targeted communities.

### B. Total impact on the target community

Of the agencies responding, 61.9% showed a moderate positive impact, while 28.0 % reported a major positive impact. Only 4.8% indicated a minimal or undetermined level of impact.

### C. Statistical measurement of calls for service generated by primary recipients of the C.O.P.S. resource.

Of the agencies responding, 71.4% stated they had no means to measure generated calls for service. The remaining 28.6 % of the responding agencies indicated they had a means of measuring the number of calls for service.

### D. Future plans on committing additional personnel and resources.

The responding agencies indicated that 95.2% had planned to continue their

commitment to community-oriented policing programs by budgeting additional personnel and resources. The remaining 4.8% were either unable to or chose not to expand.

The results of the local interviews indicated a majority of those interviewed were found to be aware of the C.O.P.S. program; and while they felt that it had a positive effect on the community, most felt the program had not affected them personally. The survey offered a wide sampling of the target area, with an estimated coverage of 10% of the target population. One drawback noted in the survey was that less than 10% of those interviewed had actually reported being the victim of a crime.

The survey, while accurate, needs to be expanded and re-evaluated to conform more to the needs and perceptions of the citizens in the target areas. In order for any type of community to believe in the law enforcement function, they must first feel that law enforcement is honest with itself in dealing with the effectiveness of the program. Should law enforcement paint an unrealistic picture of the results of any program's performance, the program is doomed from a credibility standpoint, as would any other law enforcement initiative. A meaningful evaluation system needs to be researched and implemented.

"The credibility of community policing will ultimately rest with how well an agency defines and evaluates its effectiveness. Community policing, for instance, is not just bike or foot patrols, though many agencies have used those approaches. While those are excellent programs, they do not, by themselves, equal community policing. The isolated evaluation of specific programs will not provide a true evaluation of an agency's broader community policing efforts. Community policing, when consistently evaluated, will yield the results the community demands." [Chief Lorne Kramer - Colorado Springs PD, Community Policing Consortium June 1996]

## Discussion

In general, a majority of citizens in the target area are familiar with the C.O.P.S. program, and are aware that the St. Johns County Sheriff's Office has initiated it within their community. Although they remain in a depressed, higher than average crime area, the overall perception is one of optimism. The citizens feel that this C.O.P.S. involvement is critical in the safety and rehabilitation of their community. While the logical step in improving service in an area would appear to be reducing the calls for service, the mere police presence in an area may do more for the overall impression neighborhood safety.

On researching the Internet as well as the many publications relating to community-oriented policing, it soon became apparent that although there is an abundance of information published about this concept, there has been limited information published about how to evaluate the effectiveness or impact on target communities. It is this lack of measurable impact that has caused some in the community, as well as personnel from many agencies, to question whether or not the concept is working adequately to justify the further expenditure of public and private funds. Statewide, 90% of the agencies are committing future personnel and resources to community-oriented policing, and less than 25 % have a measure to evaluate the success of the program. We, too, in St. Johns County are committing resources and

personnel without conclusive results. While the benefits or detriments may not be known for quite some time, the commitment put forth on behalf of the community in general can be viewed in a positive light. Although still in its infancy, C.O.P.S. has instilled a feeling among those residents of the target community that they are not alone or abandoned. Based on this, one could infer that the St. Johns County program is a success, as perception often drives reality.

Proponents of the C.O.P.S. program and similar programs throughout the nation argue that intervention, rather than reaction, is where law enforcement should increase and emphasize its effort. Their belief is that only by attacking the root or underlying cause of the problem can law enforcement in the future hope to keep abreast of the problem. It is their contention that this intervention by law enforcement in all levels of the community will result in a greater benefit than can be realized by current reactionary methods. The police could better utilize their time and resources by placing more effort in solving the underlying problems of citizens' complaints (Wilson and Kelling, 1989).

“A shift to community policing implies dramatic changes in the ‘winners’ and ‘losers’. The law-abiding people living in decaying, high-crime neighborhoods plagued by open drug dealing who received the full time service of a new Community Officer are the obvious new ‘winners’ and they often become the most vocal supporters of the new approach. However, their visibility can inspire a backlash from middle and upper-class residents who resent what they perceive as more of their tax dollars flowing to neighborhoods that already consume a disproportionate share of the police department’s time” (Trojanowicz, 1996).

Glenn Pierce in Boston and Lawrence Sherman in Minneapolis have confirmed through research “fewer than ten percent of addresses calling for police service generate over sixty percent of the calls for service during a given year” [Kelling, 1988, page 3]