



What it is

When police are in the news for something bad, whether that's brutality, profiling, or other kinds of misconduct, we often hear calls for more "community policing." The image of the cop walking his beat, knowing the names of the people in the neighborhood, and becoming a trusted member of the community—this is an attractive story for a lot of people. But it's also full of holes.

"Community policing" is a police strategy meant to **counter community suspicion** and hostility caused by police racism, violence, and harassment. It arose alongside the increased impoverishment of black, brown and poor communities as the "friendly face" of racialized mass incarceration. It is a strategy to calm the outrage of communities facing structural injustice while suppressing efforts to challenge that injustice. It's about optics, not meaningful policy.

Community policing is designed to create positive relationships between the police and people in the community. These "positive relationships," however, don't change the material conditions of the community, or affect the deeply-rooted racism at the core of so many police departments. What they really do is provide the police with detailed information about the community, develop a cadre of community leaders who can be tapped when police actions spark public anger, and create a political support base for the police. This relationship-building is paired with an increasing reliance on military-style SWAT teams, surprise raids, and anonymous tips.

"Patrol officers form a bond of trust with local residents who get to know them as more than a uniform. The police work with local groups, businesses, churches, and the like to address the concerns and problems of the neighborhood. Pacification is simply an expansion of this concept to include greater development and security assistance." –excerpt from the RAND corporation's "War By Other Means" report on counterinsurgency study, 2006.

How it started

Community policing was born in response to the urban uprisings and protest movements sweeping the country in the mid-1960s. Violent police and FBI repression successfully destroyed the most militant organizations of the time, but at great cost to their legitimacy in the eyes of large segments of the population. Police looked to military "counterinsurgency" and "pacification" methods for answers.

They began to add helicopters, body armor, sophisticated weaponry, and advanced surveillance ability to the police arsenal. This steadily expanded in the 1970s and was widely embraced by the police establishment in the 1980s, a time when the threat was not from organized rebellion but from deep

resentment of an economic environment of massive upward distribution of wealth from poor, black and brown communities to the rich (called “restructuring” in the language of politicians). Instead of just targeting oppositional organizations, the police focus shifted to controlling entire communities. They also identified the need to “re-brand” as a trusted community partner.

“The predominant ways of utilizing police and law enforcement within a COIN [counterinsurgency] strategy... consist of the adoption of the community-policing approach supported by offensive policing actions such as paramilitary operations, counter-guerrilla patrolling... and raids.” –excerpt from “Policing and Law Enforcement in COIN: The Thick Blue Line” (Joint Special Operations University Report, 2009)

How it works

Community policing is about developing **personal relationships** with cops-- via police/youth sports and social activities, cops on bikes, visible acts of charity, precinct open houses and “officer friendly” visits to classrooms. Additionally, the police cultivate neighborhood watch and block club networks, and build relationships with neighborhood (usually homeowner) organizations, attending their meetings, listening to their concerns, and providing safety trainings that rely on police involvement.

The image they seek to promote is one of police as **community friends**, promoting safety and connection, reducing crime and practicing “soft” problem-solving. Because of the gentler, kinder image, communities subject to police violence often demand community policing in the hope of getting some relief from police violence.

The result (and the main goal) is a steady **inflow of information** to the police.

Counterinsurgency/community policing relies on centralized databases and mapping out the “human terrain” of the community. The “information sharing” between police and community flows in only one direction. Human sources are supplemented with sophisticated surveillance technology, public security cameras and social media stalking.

The “problem-solving” aspect of community policing leads to a concentration of social service functions added to police duties, functions that would be better served by community-rooted organizations that do not have the repressive social control mission of the police. The police’s mission has, from the beginning, involved defending privileged white access to resources and opportunities, and the protection of the holders of wealth against the demands of the poor.

The soft methods of community policing are introduced alongside **paramilitary SWAT teams**. These rapid response police squads are separate from the friendly neighborhood cops so when they break down doors and terrorize people (often based on anonymous tips), the officer friendlies are on hand to reassure their community contacts and smooth things over.

Community policing does not replace **racial profiling and street harassment**; it enables them by recruiting community leaders to defend the police based on personal relationships with individual cops. These personal interactions promote the message “see, all cops aren't bad” and divert attention from a systemic understanding of the police role.

Broken windows policing– in which people are pursued for very minor infractions on the theory that it will prevent bigger crimes– can overlap with community policing by sending the message that it pays to stay on the good side of the cops through cooperation so as not to get the “suspect” treatment. This police tactic is often employed to make life uncomfortable for “undesirables” when a neighborhood is being gentrified.

“The research shows that community policing does not empower communities in meaningful ways. It expands police power, but does nothing to reduce the burden of overpolicing on people of color and the poor. It is time to invest in communities instead.” –excerpt from “The End of Policing” by Alex S. Vitale.