# Commentary: Community Policing and Public Housing Authorities

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During the 1960s, rising public concern about crime, inner-city race riots, and fractured police and community relations spurred a new interest in policing and housing policy. Since then, public housing and municipal policing have been the subjects of much research and significant change. As the articles in this symposium make clear, these two fields are intimately entwined, and it is likely that they have much to learn from one another. This commentary specifically addresses the community policing philosophy (hereafter, community policing) and its possible application to public housing; however, opportunities certainly exist, which are not discussed here, for municipal police to likewise adopt lessons from the public housing arena.

Community policing has attempted to transform the way police departments fundamentally approach their work. This transformation has encouraged new ways for the police to understand and respond to public safety issues. Before this movement, officers had become increasingly confined to their vehicles and isolated from the community, and numerous empirical studies questioned police effectiveness (Greenwood, Chaiken, and Petersilia, 1977; Kelling et al., 1974). Community policing came about as a result of a desire to improve on the traditional policing model that emphasized preventive patrol, rapid response, arrests, and investigations. Community policing asked agencies to move beyond this reactive state by emphasizing two fundamental aspects of public safety: (1) the police can rarely solve long-term, serious public safety problems alone, and (2) the fundamental unit of police business should be "problems" rather than merely a response to crimes as discrete sets of "incidents." Community policing asks agencies to incorporate these fundamental principles of partnerships and problem solving into their organizational structures. These principles should serve as the basis for everything an agency does, from the personnel they hire, to how they evaluate personnel and organizational performance, to the way their management structures operate. Community policing can be defined as—

> … a philosophy that promotes organizational strategies, which support the systematic use of partnerships and problem-solving techniques, to proactively address the immediate conditions that give rise of public safety issues, such as crime, social disorder and fear of crime. (COPS Office, 2012: 1)[1]

This philosophy, when fully implemented, provides policing agencies with new ways to examine and respond to complex public safety issues, and many of these lessons could be translated to how public housing authorities (PHAs) approach their work. Note that, according to the 2008 Census of Local Law Enforcement Agencies, the United States had 13 public housing police departments with 250 sworn personnel (Reaves, 2011). These agencies could offer great insights into the relationship between community policing and public housing, which could significantly contribute to this discussion. Community policing can provide a lens through which to examine how PHAs, police, and the communities they serve can join together to most effectively ensure that public housing and voucher programs contribute to, rather than detract from, public safety efforts.

Partnerships are critical to effective responses to important public policy issues.[2] All the articles in this symposium emphasize, in one way or another, the critical role that partnerships play in addressing public housing and public safety. Collaborative and structured partnerships that tap into the resources that various stakeholders bring to bear are vital for long-term sustained efforts to improve public well-being. Jocelyn Fontaine's article emphasizes the role that functioning partnerships between correctional agencies and community-based service providers play in facilitating the successful reintegration of offenders into stable households (Fontaine, 2013). Community policing emphasizes that the police can and should also play a part in the reintegration process, and successful model programs have demonstrated just such partnerships (LaVigne et al., 2006). Similarly, Christopher Hayes, Graham McDonald, Susan Popkin, Leah Hendey, and Allison Stolte bring attention to the need for improved partnerships with service providers to support relocated households to break any possible association with higher crime rates (Hayes et al., 2013). The articles by David P. Varady, Xinhao Wang, Dugan Murphy, and Andrew Stahlke and by Michael C. Lens discuss the critical role that landlords play in successfully implementing voucher programs so that these households do not become overly concentrated in high-crime and high-poverty areas (Lens 2013; Varady et al., 2013). Effective communication with landlords to combat negative perceptions of voucher holders can open up new housing opportunities and help in their transition. Similarly, police officers vary significantly in their level of understanding of the needs of subsidized housing residents and voucher holders, and including officers in coordinated efforts to understand and address these issues is critical. The article by Ann Owens points out how residents' perceptions of disorder and safety play a central role when assisted housing residents move into new areas (Owens, 2013). The importance of transparency and communication with citizens to address these perceptual issues before they exacerbate actual public safety and disorder problems is a central tenet of community policing.

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[1] For a more detailed articulation of the philosophy and how it relates to other innovations in policing, see Scheider, Chapman, and Schapiro (2009).

[2] For a discussion of how community policing can translate to community governance and city management, see Diamond and Weiss (2009).

In addition to emphasizing partnerships with other government agencies, nonprofit service providers, and community members, community policing emphasizes the need for partnerships with private businesses and the media. Private businesses have a great stake in the health of the community and can be key partners that bring considerable resources to addressing public housing and public safety issues (Chamard, 2006). Businesses can help identify problems and provide resources for responses, including access to their security technology and community-outreach capabilities. Local chambers of commerce and visitors' centers can help disseminate information about housing programs and crime prevention practices. The media can also significantly affect public perceptions of public housing and fear of crime. They are a powerful mechanism by which to communicate with the community regarding these issues. They can help publicize public housing information and can be an avenue to address community concerns and possible solutions.

Community policing encourages police departments to engage in proactive problem-solving efforts in a systematic and routine fashion. Problem solving is an analytic approach to identifying problems, collecting and analyzing information about them, developing and implementing innovative responses to them, and evaluating those responses to determine their effectiveness (Goldstein, 1990). These problem-solving principles may have much to offer those responsible for effectively administering public housing programs. This approach would recommend the careful identification and prioritization of the issues surrounding specific housing programs and approaching them as problems rather than as discrete, unrelated incidents. Perhaps the central issue in a particular community is the reintegration of returning offenders, as Fontaine (2013) discusses, or in another community it could be addressing the cultural differences between suburban residents and incoming voucher holders from the inner city, as profiled by Varady et al. (2013). The primary problem for another public housing program could be drug and alcohol violations, as discussed by Marah A. Curtis, Sarah Garlington, and Lisa S. Schottenfeld (2013). Just as police departments confront varying crime and public safety problems, the specific mix of issues facing each PHA is likely unique. Therefore, the routine and systematic identification and analysis of these issues should be a central part of how a housing authority operates. They should have mechanisms in place to identify, prioritize, and understand their most pressing problems.

After these problems are identified and better understood, the problem-solving process would then encourage PHAs to implement broad and uninhibited responses in collaboration with relevant stakeholders.[3] As Curtis, Garlington, and Schottenfeld (2013) highlight, these responses may include a reexamination of restrictions on access to housing assistance programs or the broader engagement of landlords and citizens, as other authors in this symposium advocate. PHAs should be encouraged to reach out to diverse stakeholders (including the police) to help develop solutions to the public safety issues that affect voucher holders and communities with high concentrations of residents who are on public assistance. Finally, PHAs should then measure and evaluate the effectiveness of these responses so that they can contribute to improved program design and implementation.

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[3] For more detail about the problem-solving process, see Goldstein (1990), Schmerler (2002), http://www.popcenter.org, and http://www.cops.usdoj.gov.

Community policing asks law enforcement agencies to transform their organizational management, structure, personnel, and information systems to institutionalize these partnerships and problem-solving principles. Public housing authorities may want to examine the benefits of employing these types of changes to their own management and administrative structures. Are they organized in such a way as to encourage effective partnerships with other entities to address ongoing problems in the properties and among the residents for whom they are responsible? Could improved mechanisms be put in place to modify and enhance their analytical capacity when it comes to understanding and addressing long-term recurring problems? Could public housing authorities modify their performance-evaluation mechanisms for their employees and their organizations to emphasize the needs to address and respond to problems and to partner with relevant stakeholders?

Community policing has become a central organizing principle for policing agencies across the United States, and its influence on police operations is unmistakable. Much has been written and learned about the implementation of community policing during the past four decades, and PHAs may want to consider adopting some of these innovations in their work. Police, in turn, likely have much to learn from the work of PHAs, given the intimate relationship between housing issues and crime. Cross-pollination between public housing and public safety agencies will surely result in improved effectiveness for both.

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