

Policing and Community Trust: Reflections on a Ride Along Program

Introduction

A ten hour ride along with an urban police department in the spring of 2023 produced several observations that were inconsistent with the community policing literature I had studied in the prior semester. Officers I accompanied were familiar with the residents in their patrol zones, greeted several by name, and described their role in terms that closely matched the partnership model emphasized in community policing research. At the same time, the interactions I observed were short, task oriented, and rarely extended beyond the immediate incident. This essay uses those observations as a starting point to examine what community policing theory claims about officer-community relationships and how accurately those claims map onto practice.

What the Theory Predicts

Community policing theory, developed principally through the work of Wilson and Kelling (1982) and expanded by Skogan (2006), holds that regular, non-enforcement contact between officers and residents builds relational trust that reduces crime through two mechanisms: increased information flow from residents to officers and increased voluntary compliance with norms. The model predicts that officers in community policing assignments will spend a measurable portion of their time in non-enforcement contact: attending community meetings, walking beats, engaging in informal conversation. This is distinct from the traditional patrol model, which emphasizes incident response and enforcement presence.

What I Observed

Over ten hours and fourteen distinct calls for service, the officers I accompanied responded to noise complaints, a domestic dispute, two traffic stops, a welfare check, and several property crime reports. Non-enforcement contact occurred in approximately four of those interactions, and it was brief: a few minutes of conversation outside a residence where the officer knew the occupants by name, a brief exchange with a business owner during a slow period on patrol. The pattern was not what community policing literature describes as proactive engagement. It was reactive with occasional relational texture woven in by

officers who seemed to apply those skills selectively based on prior relationship history.

Analyzing the Gap

The gap between the theoretical model and my observation is consistent with the implementation fidelity literature on community policing. Mastrofski, Worden, and Snipes (1995) found that community policing initiatives frequently preserve the language and organizational framing of the model while the day-to-day behavior of officers changes minimally. The officers I observed were not failing to implement community policing because they lacked the skills or the intention. They were operating under call volume pressures and dispatch expectations that structurally limited the time available for proactive contact. The gap, in other words, was institutional rather than individual.

Conclusion

The gap between community policing theory and the practice I observed is not evidence that the theory is wrong but that its implementation is uneven. The officers I accompanied understood the relational dimensions of their role and applied them selectively, concentrating more time on relationships where prior contact had created recognizable returns. What the ride along showed me, and what the academic literature confirms, is that community policing functions as an orientation rather than a protocol: it shapes the texture of interactions without determining their content. Reflecting on that gap between model and practice is itself a criminological exercise, and one the literature on implementation fidelity addresses more carefully than introductory readings suggest.