Chapter 3

Police-Community Relations: An Overview

The Police-Community Environment

- Of all the issues that affect the police in the United States, none is more important than the manner in which the police and the public interrelate.
- The police and the community are not only interdependent, but they are also inseparable from one another.

The Police-Community Environment (cont'd)

- Today's police organization are not isolated monoliths that are impervious to the community they serve.
- The police organization is not a unified community.
- Nor is there a single community to which they respond.
- Police organizations are in truth very responsive to this rapidly changing "community environment."
Defining Police-Community Relations

- They are complicated and constantly changing interactions between representatives of the police organization and an assortment of governmental agencies, public groups, and private individuals representing a wide range of competing and often conflicting interests.

Defining Police-Community Relations (cont'd)

- Successful police-community relations must take into account exchange relationships among community groups located both inside and outside the police organization.
- These exchange relationships depend on feedback from the internal and external community groups.

Acceptance of the Concept of Police-Community Relations

- The concept of police-community relations has gained a secure level of acceptance in the law enforcement establishment and in urban government.
- This acceptance alone is a sign of progress.
- It is only a first step toward implementation.
- It is much easier to agree with the reasonableness and justice of a proposal than to implement it and live with the consequences of its implementation.
- In times of tight finances, new and existing programs must compete for reduced funding and for human resources with other programs.
Tight Finances and Their Effects

- Community relations programs become locked into quick and relatively safe ways of demonstrating success:
  - “busywork” activities, which show that something is happening and goals are being accomplished
  - Solving easy problems and postponing the more difficult ones

A Historical Perspective

- The concept of police-community relations is not new.
- Sir Walter Peel reorganized the Metropolitan Police Act of 1829.
- He had two key commissioners:
  - Charles Rowan
  - Richard Mayne

Selling the Police to the People

- The reformers of the 1950s felt it was necessary to overcome the attitudes of contempt that middle-class citizens held toward police and to sell the police to the people.
- This was accomplished by sending the police to various functions to speak.
- The police argued that the “thin blue line” is the last line of defense against the dark forces of crime and disorder.
In the 1960s, the police believed that their public relations programs had been successful.
Their problems were with the “system,” which lead to confrontations with the police, who usually responded with force.
Something else was needed: police-community relations. This focus included those segments that were ignored by earlier public-relations approach.
The themes of the 1970s were Vietnam, the Watergate scandal, inflation, and the energy crisis.
Compared with the 1960s, the 1970s were relatively subdued, except for a notable and disturbing increase in violence.

Out of the turmoil of the 1960s and based on several commissions, funding was made available through the Federal Law Enforcement Assistance Administration for research, education and training, and projects of criminal justice agencies designed to reduce crime.
Law enforcement agencies had the opportunity to develop and implement new programs, and they did.
As the federal funding for them ended so did the programs.

During the 1980s, a transition of focus from enhancing relations with minority communities to providing reassurance to the general public that crime was not running rampant.
Crime prevention units became popular with police agencies throughout the nation.
These units served not only as a means of educating the public about crime prevention strategies, but also became valuable tools for enhancing public perceptions of the police.
- Even under the best circumstances, community relations programs suffered from both neglect and from being given a low priority by police departments.
- Many police officers have little interest in community relations programs and even resist and condemn them.

Commitment to the principles of police-community relations means acting on the assumption that the police are a service organization dedicated to keeping the peace, to the defense of the rights of the people, and to the enforcement of laws.

Citizens are not to be involved in “catching criminals.” When citizens insist upon becoming involved, police believe that they are likely to cause more harm than good.
- Police are not alone in thinking that they can communicate adequately with the people by means of external ambassadors.
The establishment of police-community relations units is a first, long step in recognition of the usefulness of bringing needs and special resources together in a harmonious relationship.

Nevertheless, it is just that—a first step.

The establishment of community-police relations, in a much broader sense, is a logical next step.

Success of community-police relations requires a “people’s police” attitude.

Rank-and-file police officers need to recognize that the police are a service organization dedicated to keeping the peace, defending the rights of people, and enforcing the laws.

Community-police relations is a broad, two-way program that involves every officer, not just a special unit.

Internalizing Community Relations

What “Community Relations” does not mean

- Making entire departments do what police-community relations units do now.
- Weakening law enforcement.
- Close involvement with partisan politics.
- “Bending” to community pressures.
- Turning police officers into social workers.
What “Community Relations” does mean

- Reviving the ideas of “the people’s police.”
- A more reasoned basis for police work.
- A deeper, more comprehensive interest in human life.
- An acceptance of the view that “relations” is a process, not a product.

Systems and Communities

- A system is a set of elements, interacting with each other.
- These elements may be physiological or groups of systems like the criminal justice system.
- Important to the systems analogy, is the element of feedback or information flow.

Feedback/input separates public relations from police-community relations and is essential for improving the relationship between the police and their communities.

In the past, police agencies ignored or set up shields to protect themselves from this feedback.
This feedback can be very useful in evaluating the operation or goal achievement of the system.

Feedback operates to allow the community or service clients to impact the operation and goal setting of the government agency.

Good police-community relationships demand that feedback from the community is constantly solicited and evaluated by the police.

Efforts to solicit feedback come in the form of:
- Community surveys
- Customer follow-ups
- Customer contacts
- Customer councils
- Focus groups
- Complaint tracking systems

Many Communities in Community Relations

- External Communities
  - Justice community
  - Political community
  - Human services community
  - Citizens and the police
- Internal Communities
  - Personal support community
  - Police community