

**REGIONALIZED POLICE SERVICES IN THE EARLY
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

JOURNAL ARTICLE

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This Command College Independent Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue in law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future but rather to project a number of possible scenarios for strategic planning consideration.

Defining the future differs from analyzing the past because the future has not yet happened. In this project, useful alternatives have been formulated systematically so that the planner can respond to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing the future--creating it, constraining it, adapting to it. A futures study points the way.

The views and conclusions expressed in the Command College project are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

Regional Policing: A Possibility Or A Pipe Dream?

Imagine the West Contra Costa County police agencies joined as an efficient, effective, and compassionate police services entity. Due to extensive researching of grants available for expanding computer technology, this regionalized police department has ample funding for purchasing the latest technology. The computer system is state of the art with each officer having access to any information from his or her pocket computer. Because of the immense savings realized due to consolidation and reorganization, West Contra Costa County police departments have doubled patrol in all areas. Geographic and demographic studies have rendered a policing design that is customized for each neighborhood. This tailored policing has produced intense community policing and the highest rate of citizen satisfaction within the state of California. In fact, other communities are in awe of the service and compassion that exists between the police and their West Contra Costa community. This was the exact opposite of what the cynics thought would happen.

Officers who work for the regional police are satisfied and believe they are making a difference. Because they have automated property, evidence management, and privatized prisoner handling, officers spend more than 90 percent of their time on the street. They are focused on pro-active projects such as youth training and neighborhood crime prevention. When detectives are needed, trained teams of specialists are immediately tasked with the investigation. The chief of the regional police has surrounded himself with information and critical thinkers. He is constantly reassessing the department's strategic plan.

Is this best case scenario just a pipe dream or is this a possibility for a region that is led by visionaries and risk takers? There have been many articles written about the benefits and problems associated with regionalization of police services. The comments range from saving money and reducing redundancy to loss of control and ineffective policing. A solid answer to this question does not yet exist.

Nevertheless, there is a clear indication that some police services are being consolidated and reorganized. Presently, the cities in West Contra Costa County have agreed to regionalize communications and adopt a state-of-the-art system. This was done to vastly improve the existing system and to allow smaller agencies to participate. Similarly, regionalization of the records management system will become a reality within the next two years. Regionalizing communications and records may be a giant step toward a West County policing team.

With the best case scenario and present state of policing in mind, are there any real

barriers to reaching the goal of regionalized policing, or is the present method and developments the end of the line? During December 1998, six chiefs from the West Contra Costa County area were asked ten questions regarding regionalization of police services in the 21st century. After the survey was completed it was apparent that barriers for regionalization could be insurmountable. The consensus from the survey draws a parallel between marriage and the relationship between the police and the community. It is acceptable for the community to criticize the police but there is a bond that neither will dismiss. It could be described as a “till death do us part” relationship. Citizens want to have their own unique police department that is responsive to their community.

According to Chief Mike Tye of Hercules, “The major barrier to regionalization of police services is the stakeholder. People have their own agendas and personal interests; being a good idea is not enough.” Chief Barry Garfield of Kensington believed support services could be combined because they do not affect the personal touch or stir an emotional response. His fear was that regionalizing the actual policing function would destroy, or at least diminish, community policing. Chief Edward Duncan of Richmond agreed with the idea of regional support services. In fact, he believed the vast majority of officers and citizens are not aware of the consolidation that is already in place. He also agreed that cities want to maintain control and identify with their own police department. He believed that the personal touch would also be lost if policing was totally regionalized.

Chief Linda Fellers of El Cerrito had a different stance. She felt that financial

problems would drive policing toward regionalization. Cities will be tasked with providing services as finances dwindle. She also said there was legislation pending that suggests policing should be a county function. There are funds available from the state for programs that they have regionalized. She thought the major source of resistance to regionalization would be from within the agencies themselves as well as local politics. Chief Ted Barnes of Pinole added to this comment and said that regionalization is not the future of law enforcement; the issue is political and the politicians do not support the concept. He felt the only possibility for implementation would be because of a financial crisis. Chief Doug Krathwohl of San Pablo agreed that the political hurdle is probably insurmountable. The politicians do not want to give up turf or stir a negative response from the community.

As these comments illustrate, the emotional aspect of change in policing can cause the whole concept of regionalization to be discarded. There are alternatives to total regionalization, or contracting services, or remaining in the same inefficient and costly situation. We believe that if support services were combined, privatized, and civilianized appropriately, there would most likely be economic gain. This savings would also not affect community control since police patrol will remain intact and could be controlled by the cities.

A model description could be as follows: police departments in the six West Contra Costa County cities remain intact, but they regionalize all the services except uniformed patrol. Police departments hire their own officers, but once hired they may work patrol or have a position in consolidated police services. The services combined to serve the region

will be communications, record management, investigations, traffic, special weapons and tactics, K-9 patrol, evidence collection and preservation, and prisoner handling. Evidence collection and preservation would be classified as a civilian position and reduce costs. The handling of prisoners would be contracted with a private company that would provide all services needed. Patrol and community policing would remain unchanged and served by each specific city. The West Contra Costa County Chief's Association would direct services by setting policy and making related decisions. By this plan of responsibility, even support services are accountable to their communities.

As public sector organizations strive to provide better services to the public with fixed or diminishing revenues, consolidation initiatives are often floated as a means of achieving better quality law enforcement at a higher level of efficiency. As each jurisdiction and agency is unique, so are the considerations in deciding whether or not to consolidate, and the planning of how a consolidation strategy will proceed will largely determine the likelihood of the effort's success. The following is a concise summary of the arguments for and against police consolidation.

Arguments For Consolidation

- Improvement in uniformity and consistency
- Improvement in the coordination of law enforcement services
- Improvement in the distribution and deployment of police personnel
- Improvement in training and personnel efficiency

- Improved police management and supervision
- Reduced costs
- Improved career enhancement opportunities
- Elimination of duplication of efforts between police departments
- Providing specialized services and resources previously unavailable to smaller departments
- Opportunity for innovation
- Enabling a response to the cosmopolitan nature of crime
- Elimination of political tampering in police agency operations

Arguments Against Consolidation

- Loss of local non-enforcement services
- Loss of local control
- Loss of citizen contact
- Management problems with discretion and accountability
- Morale problems among officers
- Difficult and confusing transition periods
- Cost overruns
- Citizen disillusionment

Krimmel (1997, 498) reports that it is the “fear of losing local control that most often derails attempts to eliminate or regionalize police departments.” This was evident in unsuccessful merger attempts in Lafayette Parish, Louisiana, and Center County,

Pennsylvania. In both of those cases there were fears among police, citizens and political officials that a consolidated police service would be dominated by the larger entity (Lafayette City and State College Borough, respectively) to the disadvantage of the smaller component communities. In addition, conflicting hiring and retention matters exacerbated police officers' fears.

The "economies of scale" which are often cited by pro-consolidation forces was studied by Finney (1997) in fourteen municipal jurisdictions in Los Angeles County. He found no demonstrable efficiencies among those communities who contracted for police services with the Sheriff's Office and concluded that,

"This study's findings of decreasing returns implies that whatever quantity of police services the contracting municipalities are presently purchasing could have been produced by the individual jurisdictions at a lower cost." (Finney, 1997, 125).

In other words, the fiscal benefits of consolidation may be offset by the lowered police output, in terms of patrol activity and service delivery, that results from consolidation.

Political and Practical Considerations

Considerations which police executives and political leaders must take into account when examining the feasibility of a consolidation proposal include:

- Existing intergovernmental cooperation
- Geographic considerations
- Demographic considerations
- Adaptability of police department operation conditions

- Attitude of police officials
- Public opinion
- State constitutional, legislative and civil-service regulation constraints, funding sources and apportionment among member communities

Recommendations

After reviewing all these issues, factors, and implications, the following recommendations for police agencies considering consolidation are suggested:

- Police and local government administrators must conduct thorough research regarding the need and potential obstacles and benefits to attempting mergers
- Establish clear goals for the merger and consider the history of the departments and local governments involved
- Conduct surveys and open meetings with both police officers and citizens to solicit their concerns and ideas
- Plan for all potential issues, including personnel policies and labor contracts, uniforms and patrol cars, communications equipment and training
- Foster long-term commitment and cooperation with affected government units, departments and citizen groups
- Plan on a five- to ten-year period for making a successful transition
- Consider partial consolidations or contracting of specific services such as jails, dispatch, SWAT team, training bureau or detective division while retaining independent uniform patrol services. This may result in the greatest potential blend of costs savings and efficiency, while allowing innovation. Also, it will have the least negative impact on local government autonomy and control

While there is no guarantee for the success of any police consolidation, and every particular situation is unique, these recommendations seem to carry the greatest potential for success. There are many obstacles and challenges involved with police consolidation, yet

the potential benefits and opportunities seem to make it worthwhile to consider. But consolidation should not be attempted merely for the sake of change itself. As the ancient Roman Petronius Arbitor warned about spurious reorganizations, the consequences may be untoward:

“I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet any new situation by reorganizing; and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency, and demoralization.”

References:

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