

HOW WILL RAPID URBANIZATION IMPACT COMMUNITY ORIENTED POLICING IN
A MID-SIZED LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCY IN CALIFORNIA BY 2008?

Article

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In California, the impact of rapid urbanization can be seen in just about every mid-sized and small community up and down the state. Californians are undoubtedly bucking the trends forecasted by demographers by continuing to pursue suburban living over large regional urban communities. For years, demographers have projected that society will evolve toward large regional urban centers, where life is all-inclusive.¹ That simply has not proven to be the case as the Californian dream of suburban living is alive and thriving.

Reviewing growth within small to mid-sized California cities reflects this trend of rapid urbanization of rural and suburban communities. The City of Tracy, located on the southwest edge of San Joaquin County, has experienced a near doubling of its population within the past nine years - and it is only one example representative of the entire state.²

Rapid urbanization brings about challenges for law enforcement organizations to keep pace with growth while maintaining adequate service levels. Law enforcement organizations within these small and mid-sized communities not only struggle to keep pace with growth, but also with changing expectations. As the demographics of the communities change, so do needs and expectations. Residents moving from urban communities are accustomed to law enforcement organizations having more resources at their disposal compared to that which is available in smaller agencies. This is only one example of the changing needs and expectations that result from rapid urbanization.

Another impact to mid-sized law enforcement agencies experiencing rapid urbanization is the sheer number of criminal activities committed in their communities requiring police resources. People fleeing cities for rural and suburban areas may find themselves less safe than they were in the city. A University of Virginia study concludes that some sparsely settled outer communities in the United States are more dangerous than the metropolitan areas they surround.³

Residents moving to outer suburban areas may be at greater risk for traffic fatalities, homicides by strangers, and assorted property crimes. Researchers ranked crimes committed in 60 U.S. metropolitan counties and nine central cities to develop this opinion.⁴

The inception and adoption of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) in California law enforcement agencies has been beneficial. Undoubtedly, the COPS policing strategy has served to improve law enforcement services and the overall relationships between law enforcement and the public. When evaluating the impact of COPS on small and mid-sized law enforcement agencies, it is clear that the philosophy has allowed communities to develop their police organizations with a collaborative approach, focussing on community issues. However, a secondary benefit has been the additional personnel resources that have been funded through federal grants resulting from the 1994 crime bill.

Since 1994, a majority of law enforcement agencies across the country have enjoyed, in one manner or another, benefits of the 1994 crime bill adopted by then-President Bill Clinton. One could argue that the largest beneficiaries of federal grant funds to come from the crime bill were mid-sized and small law enforcement agencies. The crime bill, which embraced Community Oriented Policing Services programs, provided funding through federal grants to employ thousands of new police officers across the nation. The majority of these new positions were awarded under the auspices of COPS programs, which might not otherwise have been developed and staffed in mid-sized and small law enforcement agencies. As a result, many suburban and rural communities impacted by rapid urbanization have enjoyed police services and programs which otherwise would not have been conceivable. COPS has facilitated the tooling of small and mid-sized law enforcement organizations to meet the changing and diverse needs and expectations of their rapidly growing communities. The program, although designed

to embrace the community as a stakeholder, currently falls back on law enforcement agencies to staff. The transition of COPS to the next level will empower communities to police themselves.

Yes, police helping the community to police themselves.

Police services that could be delivered to the community, by the community, are:

- Parking enforcement
- Reporting of misdemeanor cases having no suspects
- Vehicle abatement
- School ground patrols
- Retail center foot patrols
- Neighborhood living conflicts, such as barking dogs
- Speed monitoring in residential developments
- Non-injury collision reporting
- Graffiti reporting and abatement
- Traffic control for community events

These service demands currently fall on both sworn and non-sworn personnel of most small to mid-sized law enforcement agencies and have traditionally competed for staffing with traditional COPS programs designed to engage the community. A collaborative effort would retain a COPS strategy, while supplementing the ability of the city to offset the impacts of rapid urbanization on police services. COPS would become a resource in delivering police services, rather than a demand upon the services – it would be self-sustaining.

Today, with the onslaught of news stories and articles reporting the abandonment of COPS within same mid-sized and small law enforcement agencies, it is important to ask what has happened. If the COPS policing model is so effective for serving growing and diverse

communities, how is it possible to abandon such a policing strategy? Law enforcement representatives of small and mid-sized agencies quickly point to the loss of COPS federal grant funding to support the strategy and the looming budgetary crisis in California. Simply stated, small and mid-sized law enforcement organizations developed their COPS programs through funding sources other than city revenues. Given the challenges of balancing the impacts of rapid urbanization and shrinking budgets, many agencies have determined that it is necessary to return to a basic service delivery model, which purportedly requires fewer officers per capita. The agencies believe that by returning to basic law enforcement services, they will be able to serve their growing populations while weathering lean budget times.

A program that has been so highly touted as one of the most effective law enforcement service delivery systems in decades may well be nearing extinction. The demise of COPS may be brought about by the very resource that promoted the program – dollars and cents. Will law enforcement abandon COPS because, as many law enforcement professionals contend, COPS as a service delivery model is extremely labor intensive? Was the COPS philosophy really only about money, or did it truly serve communities through collaborative efforts? Or, will the law enforcement profession seek ways to maintain the strategy because it has recognized the importance, benefits, and strides made in policing communities through COPS programs?

Many law enforcement agencies are prepared to abandon the COPS strategy out of a perceived necessity to do more with less. However, they could also be failing to see the COPS policing model as a resource to serving increased populations without increasing the number of police officers. The current application of the COPS strategy is labor intensive because so many law enforcement agencies view COPS as a program staffed by police officers, designed to serve the community.

By implementing programs that empower the community to serve in a role to assist in policing themselves, law enforcement agencies will be able to maintain service levels while fostering COPS. Programs designed to utilize volunteers to function in roles not requiring sworn officers, such as parking enforcement, reporting of misdemeanor cases having no suspects, non-injury collision reporting, vehicle abatement, graffiti reporting and abatement, school ground patrols, general preventative patrols in retail areas, high visibility traffic monitoring/calming, neighborhood living conflicts, and traffic control for community events are all police services that the community can take over. Volunteerism is an untapped resource, which could, and should, be promoted as the response to lower staffing levels brought on by reduced budgets, without abandoning the COPS strategy. Yes, COPS must be viewed as a resource and not a program that requires law enforcement staffing.

Embracing the concept of a community policing itself provides resources to law enforcement agencies and serves to foster a COPS philosophy. Organizations must be ready to truly empower their community to work collaboratively and let go of the idea that COPS is a one-way street. COPS also involves the community serving the community. By investing a relatively small amount of time and effort from law enforcement personnel instituting COPS programs that are volunteer-driven now, law enforcement agencies will reap the benefits for years to come. Adapting this philosophy, small to mid-sized law enforcement agencies will be able to approach rapid urbanization with a fresh, positive outlook. Service demands will increase, but so will manpower, through a pool of volunteers assisting in making their community a safer place in which to live.

The COPS strategy can be taken to its next generation through a structured and closely managed citizen volunteer program. Citizens will be empowered to perform certain functions of

policing that are currently delivered through the services of sworn and non-sworn police officers. The community will benefit in that it will experience an increased level of service in quality of life issues, while police officers will have more time to effectively and proactively focus on criminal offenses. The community and police department will become one. This will reflect the ultimate collaborative approach to policing a community, one which none of the current COPS strategies have attained. This is not just a philosophy that touts itself as being community oriented; it is, rather, a program comprised of the community. More importantly, it is a program that delivers public safety services.

Expectations are that the community will receive an increased level of personalized service that brings citizens together as a community, being fully knowledgeable of community problems. Concerns lie in the fact that citizen involvement in the program will require careful scrutiny to insure that the wrong person is not empowered to take advantage of others, and that citizens are not placed in harm's way. The desired outcome of the program is that a new generation of COPS will emerge, bringing the community together, while providing the police department with additional resources to offset the impacts of rapid urbanization that could otherwise result in the abolishment of COPS. Implementing this new COPS program will not only allow citizens to attain a comfort level through association with public safety, but it will also empower them to impact the level of safety that is provided to the community.

This strategy, which empowers citizens in the community to participate in policing their community, is a vision that takes the theory of COPS to a new level. It will usher in a new era of policing, enacting a truly collaborative approach, rather than a series of programs espousing a collaborative approach. More importantly, however, is the vision of sustaining COPS, while

offsetting the impacts of the rapid urbanization, which is projected to ultimately result in the demise of COPS.

Fostering a volunteer-driven COPS program will require careful planning on the part of law enforcement officials, city officials, and community members. Policies, goals, and procedures will need to be formulated before the program can be implemented. While this may seem a daunting task, law enforcement agencies should not be deterred by what, on its face, appears to be a very complex process. The benefits reaped by the entire community will be well worth the efforts put forth.

Key components to the success of a volunteer-driven COPS program are:

- Involving the media
- Giving citizens a voice in policing policy
- Recruiting police officer candidates with a higher level of education and a demonstrated commitment to community service

Law enforcement agencies must avail themselves of the publicity the media is able to provide to promote public interest in supporting a volunteer-driven COPS program. Embracing the media and working collaboratively, recognizing them as an active stakeholder within the community, will be important to the success of this new age of COPS. The media is able to provide a valuable link to the public, delivering the message that a new and exciting approach to community oriented policing is on the horizon.

Another important element to pursue is inviting citizens to participate in setting policing policy. Establishing a Citizen Advisory Group comprised of a cross section of the city's population will inject new perspectives into existing community policing programs. Law enforcement agencies will benefit from the talent and expertise of a diverse group of individuals who have the potential to become ambassadors for the police department.

Recruiting new officers from a pool of individuals who are better educated and have a demonstrated commitment to community service will also be important to the advancement of this new COPS program. New police officers who have a college background have the potential to bring to the department better verbal and written communication skills, better judgmental and critical thinking skills, and a greater tolerance for the diversity of lifestyles that are increasingly prevalent in mid-sized cities experiencing rapid urbanization. Involvement in community service indicates a willingness to serve others, an attribute well suited to this new COPS philosophy.

COPS is a policing strategy that has proven to be effective. It is a strategy that serves to unite the community and its law enforcement agency. The approach of transitioning COPS to the next level will be its savior. COPS must be expanded to provide programs that both embrace the community in the philosophical sense and tangible programs that empower the community to police itself, working hand-in-hand with law enforcement to serve the community. This new generation of COPS will equip mid-sized law enforcement agencies in California experiencing rapid urbanization with the ability to meet service demands while retaining a COPS philosophy.

Endnotes

- ¹ United Nations, Report on Urbanization and Migration, 12
- ² U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, 1990-2000 Census, 231
- ³ Trefil, James, “A Science of the City,” Anchor Books Publishing, New York 2000, 117
- ⁴ Ibid.

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