Chapter XIV

Development of Interactive Web Sites to Enhance Police/Community Relations

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ABSTRACT
This chapter discusses research conducted to determine the feasibility of introducing police Web sites and virtual communities as new tools in the move toward community-oriented policing. Using citizen satisfaction surveys designed to evaluate police department performance in three Ohio cities, a profile of future citizen expectations regarding interactions with the police is constructed. Based on differences in the demographics of the cities’ populations, probabilities of success in implementing online communications with the police are assigned. A model for establishing a virtual community for the Trenton, Ohio Police is explored in light of the survey results and established community-oriented policing theory.

INTRODUCTION
Imagine the following two scenarios, each of which could easily happen in any one of a thousand different city neighborhoods nationwide.

Scenario 1: After a long day at the office, Mrs. Sally Jones returns home after dark. Approaching her front door, she notices that it is ajar. As she gets
closer, a man, covered head to toe in black, bursts from her home and runs past her into the night. Grabbing her cell phone, she dials 911 and reaches the police. Officers are dispatched promptly, but Mrs. Jones is afraid to go inside — in case someone else lurks in the shadows. Yet, she is afraid to stand out in the open where she also feels vulnerable. She steps around the corner of her house to be out of view when, suddenly, she’s caught in the bright flashlights of two unfamiliar police officers, guns drawn, as they approach her from the shadows.

Scenario 2: After a long day at the office, Mrs. Sally Jones returns home after dark. Approaching her front door, she notices that it is ajar. Looking just past the door she notices the city police squad car in her driveway. Two officers that she has known for years, Officer Bill George and Sergeant Karen Smith are talking to each other — there are two angry looking men already in the back seat of the squad car. As she approaches the officers, Sgt. Smith calls out, “Hi Mrs. Jones, we were on patrol in the neighborhood and saw one of these characters around the corner. Things didn’t add up and he eventually led us to his partner who was already working on your front door. These guys will never learn — we know everybody in the neighborhood and it’s real easy to see who’s out of place.”

These scenarios illustrate the difference between the traditional police practice of call-based policing and the more modern approach known as community-oriented policing. In the first scenario, the officers were just doing their job, as impersonal as it may sound. Unfamiliar with the residents of the neighborhood, they were forced to treat everyone as a suspect until proven otherwise. Mrs. Jones not only faced a burglary that night but also probably had the scare of her life looking down the barrels of two guns pointed in her direction. Scenario 2 illustrates true community-oriented policing. The two officers on patrol recognized that someone looked out of place and did a little investigating on their own — not waiting for a call. By the time Mrs. Jones arrived home, the situation was under control.

These idealized scenarios were created for illustrative purposes only, but they do indicate the type of change in policing philosophy that is working its way through police departments across the country. Community-oriented policing places officer and the citizens that they protect into much closer contact on a routine basis. Both sides become much more familiar with each other before problems occur and can work together more effectively when the need arises. Implemented correctly, community-oriented policing can reduce stress for the officers and citizens alike, plus allow the officers to cover more ground in terms of handling the problems that are of greatest concern to the neighborhoods where they work.
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