

Acknowledging Existence of a Fourth Era of Policing: The Information Era

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Abstract

The main objective of this research paper is to enable formal acknowledgement of a fourth era of policing within the body of knowledge comprising the evolution of American policing. The history of policing continues to be documented in the context of three eras: political, reform, and community. The Community Era typically encompasses 1970 through the present time. Research reveals that significant information-based policing strategies have emerged during the 1990s and have been predominant during the 21st Century. These strategies include evidence-based policing, intelligence-led policing, and predictive policing. Tools integral to the strategies include crime analysis and CompStat. Formal, widespread recognition of a fourth era of policing, termed the "Information Era," can encapsulate the disparate information-based strategies. This categorization by the core attribute in common, i.e., information, not only delineates the end of one era and the beginning of another but also facilitates evaluation of the direction policing is taking and enables any course corrections to be taken in a timely and coordinated manner.

Keywords: Broken windows; Community era; Community policing; CompStat; Evidence-based policing; Information era; Informatization; Intelligence-led policing; Political era; Predictive policing; Problem-oriented policing; Reform era; SARA technique

Introduction

Policing within the United States has to date been viewed widely as having evolved through three eras: political, reform, and community. The Political Era, so named because of the close ties of the police with politics, dated from the introduction of policing in large municipalities during the 1840s through the early 1900s. The Reform Era, developed in reaction to the shortcomings of the Political Era, took hold during the 1930s and began to erode during the late 1970s. The Reform Era gave way to the Community Era, so named because of its emphasis on a police-community partnership in solving crime problems [1]. By the end of the 20th Century, the hallmark of the Community Era, i.e., "community policing," had become an ingrained policing strategy (or, more correctly, a policing philosophy) across the nation, and its namesake ("Community Era") continues to be the umbrella descriptor in the literature, even for the array of information-based practices characteristic of evolved contemporary

strategies. What has been paid scant attention in the literature is formalization of a fourth era of policing. Formation of a fourth era, which could be named the Information Era, has occurred through the confluence of phenomena occurring during the late 20th Century and early 21st Century. These phenomena are (1) increased accountability (both within agencies and by governmental oversight authorities), (2) "informatization" (extent to which society has become information-based), (3) and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Predominant law enforcement strategies that have arisen in the era include evidence-based policing, intelligence-led policing, and predictive policing. Moreover, advances in forensic science and a proactive orientation have enabled solving crimes heretofore classified as "cold cases." Creation of a single organizing framework, i.e., a fourth era, for the strategies that have ensued beyond community policing provides for a macro perspective and common categorization for discussion and analysis of operative strategies. In turn, it is anticipated this will help the policing profession examine what the past and present portend for the future.

Background

During the Political Era, police departments were inte-

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grally connected to the social and political milieu of the local “ward,” the smallest subdivision of a municipality. The political nature of appointments to police positions resulted in inefficiencies and disorganization as well as corruption in the form of supporting the political interests of elected officials. Control over police by local politicians, conflict between urban reformers and local ward leaders over the enforcement of laws regulating the morality of urban immigrants without regard to ethnic values, and corruption produced an ongoing struggle for controlling the police. While many states in the wake of the passage of the Pendleton Act of 1883 enacted legislation to protect government employees from political interference, at the same time satisfaction of the requirements of civil service law made dismissing incompetent employees a formidable undertaking [2].

Chief August Vollmer of the Berkeley, California, Police Department was the visionary who first rallied police executives around the idea of reform during the 1920s. Reformers such as Vollmer rejected politics as the basis of police legitimacy. Police reformers therefore allied themselves with Progressives. Law and professionalism were established as the bases of police legitimacy [3]. The 1930s became a pivotal period as the American police gained increasing legitimacy in society. The 1931 National Commission on Law Observance and Law Enforcement presented a number of reforms for the police. Central to the Commission’s recommendations were provisions for civil service classification for police throughout the country and enhanced support for education and training [4]. The 1968 Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act included extensive funding for law enforcement research and education to improve and strengthen law enforcement [5]. Using the focus on criminal law as the source of legitimacy, police in the Reform Era became agencies of “law enforcement.” The goal was to control crime, and officers were to be impartial law enforcers, with limited discretion, who were impersonal and oriented toward crime solving. The role of citizens in the context of the Reform Era was to be relatively passive recipients of professional crime control services. Thus, 20th Century reform measures, originating from both internal and external forces, shaped policing well into the 1970s [6].

Numerous societal events occurring during the 1960s and 1970s stymied policing effectiveness. Some of the more significant changes included the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, episodes of civil unrest within major urban areas, the changing age of the population (more youths and teenagers), and increased oversight of police actions by the courts. The police found themselves distanced from the community and ill-equipped to handle the bombardment of challenges. Fortunately, the funding that had been channeled into policing research had begun to yield dividends at just the time when needed the most. The findings of research revealed that if information about crimes and criminals could be obtained from citizens by police, investigative and other units could significantly increase their effect on crime. Too, research into foot patrol suggested that it contributed to quality of life in cities, reduced fear of crime, increased citizen satisfaction with police, and increased the morale and job satisfaction of police [7]. Thus, the tenets that dominated police thinking for a generation were no

longer applicable, and the stage was set for the introduction of community policing and the shift to the Community Era.

Although it is not clear when the community policing movement began, the roots of community policing date back to the work of scholars such as Professor Herman Goldstein who in the late 1970s advocated that police needed to address the underlying dynamics contributing to crime [8]. Soon thereafter Professor Robert Trojanowicz added to Goldstein’s problem-oriented policing a framework, termed “community policing,” featuring a pronounced police-citizen partnership toward problem identification, prioritization, and resolution. Both problem-oriented policing and community policing employ the SARA methodology: “Scanning” for patterns of crime, performing an “Analysis” of the factors contributing to the crime problem, crafting a “Response” to the situation, and “Assessing” the effectiveness of the response over time [9]. In addition to incorporation of the SARA technique, community policing embraces the “broken windows” concept, which stresses maintenance of the outward appearance of a community as vital for sending a message to potential perpetrators of crimes that community members do care about the quality of life within their neighborhood and are vigilant to that end. Conversely, the concept holds that conditions of disrepair, e.g., broken windows, accumulations of trash, and abandoned cars, signal to criminals that no one cares about their neighborhood, and the lack of guardianship effectively invites crime commission [10].

Methodology

This essay presents an interpretation of police history that may assist police executives in understanding how past policing strategies were affected by dominant political, social, and economic factors. Additionally, through identifying the complexion of the core attribute in common, i.e., information, among the collective of prevailing and emergent strategies, we may evaluate the current direction policing is taking and effect any necessary course corrections in a timely manner.

An initial action has been to affirm that in fact there has been a failure (or a reluctance) to formally recognize that policing has entered a fourth era. Content analysis of the principal policing textbooks readily confirms that the history of American policing continues to be documented as comprised of three eras, with the Community Era commencing in 1970 and continuing through the present time. Moreover, an authoritative synopsis of policing’s eras and related policing styles recently compiled by Grossmont College further confirms acknowledgement of only the traditional three policing eras [11].

Through examination of the core elements of the prevailing and emergent policing strategies comprising the fourth era, there may be able to be discerned aspects that if unchecked can be detrimental to the spirit of public policing within a democratic society. Such was the case when in 1988 the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University convened a blue ribbon committee of practitioners and scholars to study what the evolving face of policing meant for the welfare of citizens and the fulfillment of the police mission. In fact, the committee found that there was a pronounced

need to refocus police partnerships with the community [12].

Results and Discussion

Comparison of the predominant three contemporary policing strategies reveals the three have in common the fact they are decidedly data-intensive. This is not to say that problem-oriented policing and community policing, the face of the Community Era, are not dependent on the collection of information related to a criminal event. The difference is the point at which data is routinely introduced and the degree to which data influences a course of action. This significant reliance on data may be readily observed through review of the salient aspects of the three prominent emergent strategies. (evidence-based policing, intelligence-led policing, and predictive policing).

The concept of evidence-based policing gained prominence upon the Police Foundation's publication of Professor Lawrence Sherman's paper on the subject in 1998. Professor Sherman, referring to the medical model as a prime example, suggested that doing research is not enough and that proactive efforts were required to push accumulated research evidence into practice. Professor Sherman postulated that evidence-based policing entailed two very different kinds of research: (1) basic research on what works best when implemented under controlled conditions and (2) ongoing outcomes research about the results each unit is actually achieving through applying basic research premises. Furthermore, he asserted that community policing is not clearly linked to evidence about effectiveness in preventing crime; it is much more about how to do police work than it is about desired outcomes [13].

Skeptics may assert that there is nothing new about evidence-based policing, and that other strategies are inclusive of its principles. However, evidence-based policing "is a systematic effort to parse out and codify unsystematic 'experience' as the basis for police work, refining it by ongoing systematic testing of hypotheses. The policing of domestic violence offers a clear illustration of what is new about the evidence-based paradigm. The National Institute of Justice and the Police Foundation have provided law enforcement agencies with extensive information on what works to prevent repeated domestic violence [14]." Agencies opting to follow the practices benefit not only by not having to respond to repeat calls, but also benefit from the goodwill engendered by a far more often satisfied, than not, victim.

Intelligence-led policing has become a significant movement in policing in the 21st Century. It began in the United Kingdom in the 1990s as an operational tactic to reduce crime through proactive policing targeted by criminal intelligence and focused on active, prolific offenders. Intelligence-led policing may be viewed as a managerial model in which criminal intelligence and data analysis are pivotal to an objective, decision making framework that enables crime reduction. In essence, objective analysis of crime data is the central component of this top-down policing strategy [15]. The terrorist attack of 2001 added impetus to reliance on intelligence and its analysis. In the wake of the terrorist attack, authorities formed regional intelligence hubs

known as fusion centers to facilitate collection of disparate pieces of information that when connected could provide key intelligence for thwarting future terrorist incidents [16].

Predictive policing builds on intelligence-led policing through exploiting technologies that allow the police to ostensibly forecast where crime may be most likely to occur [17]. It employs algorithms that are considerate of a widened body of potential crime correlates. For example, a data base of dog licenses might be queried to ascertain locations where dogs may be located, and these locations may be determined to be less likely to become targets of burglaries. Similarly, additional inquiry could reveal the number and ages of the occupants of households where dogs were not shown to be present, which could reveal a potential for a lack of guardianship on premises during peak hours of burglaries. Thus, predictive policing may be defined as a strategy that develops and uses information and advanced analysis to inform forward-thinking crime prevention [18].

Conclusion

Formal, widespread recognition of a fourth era of policing, termed the Information Era, can encapsulate the array of information-based policing strategies prevalent at the beginning of the 21st Century: evidence-based, intelligence, and predictive. This era designation is wholly in line with the distinctive character and events shared by the three strategies. Beyond the specific strategies, tools that have attained prominence during the era are crime analysis and CompStat; both are markedly data-driven. Indeed, crime analysis has evolved to be both a profession as well a set of techniques. The professionals who perform crime analysis, and the techniques used, are dedicated to helping a police department become more effective through better information [19]. CompStat, introduced in New York City in 1994 as a data-driven management model, has been credited with effecting pronounced decreases in crime as well as increasing quality of life. Accurate and timely intelligence has been, and continues to be, the lifeblood of CompStat [20]. Acknowledgement in the literature of a fourth era of policing, which incorporates the strategies of evidence-based, intelligence-led, and predictive policing strategies, as well as the predominant analytic tools, provides for a macro perspective. In turn, this categorization enables ongoing analysis and refinement, as well as insight into the complexion of future iterations.

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