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a paper by

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PROBLEM-ORIENTED POLICING

**The Rationale, the Concept, and
Reflections on Its Implementation**

Foreword

In July 1995, the Police Research Group (PRG) hosted a one-day conference at Cambridge entitled 'Crime Control in Theory and Practice'. Our main aim was to take advantage of the presence in the UK of Professors Herman Goldstein, Ron Clarke, Marcus Felson and John Eck from the United States, and all with considerable experience in developing theoretical and practical approaches to crime.

The paper by Professor Goldstein discussed the development of problem-oriented policing. It reproduced here as background to his talk at ACPO's Summer Conference 1996.

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Herman Goldstein

I am not a criminologist. My work has not focused specifically and directly on the control of crime. Rather, for the past forty years, I have studied and worked with the police. My focus has been on the police as an institution—on the role of the police in society, their place in government, their role within the criminal justice system, their decision-making, and, most specifically, their efforts to bring about changes within their operations so that they might increase their capacity to get their job done fairly and effectively. This focus has led me to explore a wide range of complex issues, many of which relate to that intricate balance that we struggle to preserve in a democracy between the exercise of governmental power and the rights of the individual.

Before I talk about problem-oriented policing, I think it important to provide some background. I do so because, in the United States, the concept of problem-oriented policing is, in many quarters, being trivialized. It is being reduced to a simplistic four step process for dealing with problems that, unattended, repeatedly require police attention. This narrow interpretation roughly captures a central element of the concept. But lost in the translation is the potential and the richness contemplated in the concept as originally set forth. The value of problem-oriented policing is in its breadth—in its comprehensive nature as an integrated plan that is designed to respond to an accumulation of weaknesses in the basic arrangements for policing in the United States. I think it helpful, therefore, at the outset to identify the weaknesses to which the concept is responsive. I do not know if these weaknesses exist in the provisions made for policing in the United Kingdom.

The history of policing in the United States—unlike your beginnings—is not a source of great pride. August Vollmer, who was both a practitioner and a great scholar of the police, observed in 1931 that law enforcement agencies in the U.S. were usually held in contempt; that policing was one of our national jokes. Unfortunately, with thousands of autonomous police agencies (ranging in size from over 38,000 officers to a force of one), vestiges of that era remain. Some agencies continue to behave in ways that invite contempt. But in the sixty years since Vollmer's comment, the vast majority of police agencies in the States, challenged by the difficult problems they must handle, have made enormous strides, especially in the last two decades. A good number of our police departments are now at the cutting edge in modern-day policing.

But police in the U.S. face a constantly increasing workload and problems that have grown steadily more acute. As a consequence, despite their progress, the police seem to

be permanently locked in a catch-up mode, pressured from outside and increasingly from within to search for new ways in which they can overcome past difficulties and better respond to the numerous and often conflicting demands made upon them. This commits them to an almost perpetual agenda of reform. But many of the reforms of the past have been superficial and frequently limited in their impact. The same can be said about currently popular reforms, including much of what is advocated under the umbrella of community policing and in the latest commitment to hire thousands of additional officers. What accounts for this phenomenon? Why the constant cycle of falling behind, experiencing crises, critical examination of the police, followed by reforms that seem inevitably to be superficial?

Much of the difficulty that has been experienced in the development of American policing, in my opinion, stems from our failure to probe with sufficient depth into the complexity of the police job; to (1) acknowledge the reality of what it is the police are called on to do and (2) to refine laws, policies and practices in ways that enable the police to carry out their agreed-upon function in a fair and effective manner. The police function is too often viewed as a simple task, carried out in ways that fit the mythology and folklore that has built up around policing. An enormous gap exists between this popular image we have of what the police do and how they do it and reality—a candid, forthright acknowledgment of their task and how they really get it done. Those working in police agencies are caught in this gap. They are formally held to the standards associated with the image—and often work hard themselves to support that image—but, on a day-to-day basis, are expected to adapt, compromise, and even improvise to meet the realities of their job. This creates enormous, deep conflicts for the police as individuals and for the police as an institution—conflicts that are not addressed by common reforms, by superficial change. In the innercore of our large cities, these conflicts make the job of a police officer almost impossible. To be effective, reform in policing must confront these conflicts; it must reduce the tensions and resolve the differences between image and reality so that the police can operate in a more straightforward fashion—honestly, openly, and with broader agreement about their role and what can realistically be expected of them.

To be clear on what I am trying to get at, let me be much more specific about what I see as some of the major conflicts in policing in the U.S. today.

The police are commonly viewed, primarily, as crime fighters. But in reality, the police have always had a broad function in which fighting crime is but one of their tasks.

So it follows that police are often judged, recruited, trained, and supervised based on a small portion of what they do.

The police have traditionally been viewed as having unlimited capacity, as being omnipotent. And the police themselves have worked hard to support this image. But actually, the capacity of the police is extremely limited. Every police officer is painfully aware of this.

Based on their image of omnipotence, the police are thought to need little, if any, assistance. In reality, the police cannot get their job done by themselves. They need all of the social networks that contribute to behavioral control. They need the help of the community.

The widespread belief is that, in enforcing the law, the police exercise no discretion. But in reality, police are expected to exercise discretion all of the time. If all goes well, they are praised. If not, they are subject to being blamed for the consequences.

It is commonly assumed that the police are part of the criminal justice system; that it is through their power of arrest that they get their job done. But in reality, a small percentage of all police business involves arrest. The criminal justice system is often neither appropriate nor effective. The police lack adequate means for getting their multifaceted job done and often therefore resort to stretching, abusing and adapting their arrest powers to do what is expected of them.

The impression is widely held that the police, having almost psychic capacities, strategically plan their use of their resources; that they are guided by legislative and administrative setting of priorities. In reality, police do not respond to formal directives, but most directly to the telephone, reacting to calls for service. They are incident-driven.

The public consistently holds the police accountable for preventing crime and disorder. But, given the enormous investment in responding quickly to calls for service, police are primarily reactive. Prevention is, at best, a peripheral function in most police agencies.

The police are still commonly organized along semi-military lines, with the attendant characteristics of formality, rigidity, and top-down management. In reality, the nature of the police function requires informality, flexibility and decision-making at the lowest levels of the organization. Their organization does not support the way in which they are expected to operate. It is often a major impediment to getting their job done more effectively.

Individual police officers are often viewed as automatons, expected to follow precise orders, subject to tight controls, and skilled primarily in physically overpowering criminal offenders. They are often recruited and trained based on these criteria. In reality, officers must frequently function without clear direction and with a high degree of independence, employing the skills commonly associated with, for example, a mediator, an educator, and a community organizer.

With conflicts of this magnitude built into our police organizations (and there are many more that I have not identified), is it any wonder that police in the U.S. are experiencing a high level of frustration in trying to improve their capacity to deal with current-day problems? It should not come as a surprise that common reforms, made in isolation—like streamlining the organization, revising recruitment standards, extending training, or adding personnel (changes that leave the conflicts untouched)—have little effect?

Let's put these conflicts aside for a few moments to get the full picture before us. Still another large and somewhat related condition in policing that contributes in many ways to our past and current difficulties.

The entire police establishment in the United States has developed without benefit of a careful, systematic building of knowledge regarding the multitude of different problems that the police are called on to handle. We do not know, with any confidence, what works and doesn't work in responding to them. The growth of modern-day policing in the States, uneven and halting as it has been, reflects a skewed preoccupation with the running of the organization—with organizational issues, staffing, technology, information systems, communications, and management. It is as if the police had an obsession with efficiency. No comparable investment has been made in understanding the business of policing—the substantive problems the police are expected to handle on a daily basis. I have reference, for example, to such common problems as residential burglaries, street robberies, thefts from cars, complaints about noise, and disorderly conduct in bars. Little effort, relatively speaking, has been devoted—by the police, by government, and by our academic institutions—to developing knowledge about these common problems, a kind of insight that might enable the police to deal more effectively with them.

I know of few vocations in modern society in which there is such a comparable vacuum; in which so little systematic thought has been given to that which the enterprise seeks to impact. The contrast with other endeavors is striking. For example, I

come from an agricultural state. The farmers in Wisconsin are constantly striving to improve their operations by acquiring modern equipment, by getting the most out of their personnel, and by adopting planting and harvesting procedures that are more efficient. But they also have an intense interest in the agricultural research undertaken regarding their products. They base their operations—in their fields and in their barns—on the latest detailed knowledge they acquire about the specific crops and animals they want to raise and the methods best suited for raising them. These same farmers engage with academics in conducting research. They knock on my university's doors, demanding attention be given to matters of concern to them.

As in agriculture, in most occupations—and especially in those that are characterized as professions—some component is committed to inquiry, to analysis, to research on the problems routinely handled or the products produced. And procedures are in place to dispense this knowledge to practitioners in ways that are useful to them. Policing has a critical need to develop a similar capacity: to collect and share the expertise of practitioners; to engage practitioners in research; to build a systematic process for developing knowledge about the problems police commonly handle; to identify new responses and subject them to tests and rigorous evaluation; and to arrange for easy access to knowledge as it is developed. The absence of this intellectual dimension in policing has stunted the growth of the field and—like the conflicts I identified earlier—accounts for much of the difficulty and frustration that have been experienced in trying to bring about constructive, lasting change.

I have offered this somewhat expensive critique of American policing because I feel strongly that the value of future reform in the States depends heavily on how responsive that reform is to the difficulties and needs I've identified. Problem-oriented policing—the concept with which I am so closely associated—grows out of an awareness of the conflicts and vacuum I've described. It consists of many elements that, taken together, are designed to reduce and resolve past conflicts. And its centerpiece, to which all of these elements relate, is a commitment to analyzing specific pieces of police business—thereby building a body of knowledge about the business of policing and building into change efforts an appropriate balance of concern for the substantive problems the police are expected to handle.

All of this requires, initially, that we acknowledge that the police are not simply engaged in law enforcement, but more accurately handle a broad range of community

problems. This, in turn, requires moving well beyond the prevailing attitude that policing consists of the handling of incidents. It recognizes the relationship between and among incidents—e.g., incidents involving the same behavior, the same address, or the same people. It calls for grouping these incidents as problems. Police, I would argue, must think of their business as responding to specific problems—such as robberies at automated teller machines, bicycle theft, landlord-tenant disputes, and gatherings of noisy, disorderly teenagers in parks.

Clearly identifying a problem can itself be a difficult task. Once this process is established, we must then work to develop a commitment to analysis; to taking a sufficient interest in frequently recurring problems so that police can pinpoint contributing factors that, if dealt with directly, may eliminate or reduce the magnitude of the problems. This requires developing a capacity to undertake systematic inquiry; to examine each substantive problem selected for attention in all of its dimensions as that problem is experienced in the community. Analysis requires gathering information from police files, from the minds of experienced police officers, from other agencies of government, and from private sources. It requires conducting house-to-house surveys and talking with victims, complainants, and offenders. The range and depth of the inquiry will obviously depend upon the magnitude of the problem and the level at which it is examined.

Given this better understanding of a specified problem, the goal then shifts to an uninhibited, broad-ranging search for the most effective response to it. That response might take the form of referrals to other agencies of government or in the private sector; informational or educational efforts; specific efforts to engage the community; the use of some aspect of the civil law, such as injunctions or abatement proceedings; increased regulation by ordinance or administrative regulations; or a wide range of techniques grouped under situational prevention that includes, for example, target hardening, access control, formal surveillance, and removing the inducements to commit crimes. The process thus attaches a high priority to looking beyond the criminal justice system to a wide range of other alternatives; to try to design a customized response that holds the greatest potential for dealing effectively with a specific problem in its earliest stages. In weighing alternatives, the criminal justice system is not abandoned. Rather, it is reserved for those situations in which it is likely to be most effective.

Although finding a more effective response is the primary goal, the search, by its very nature, should also serve to reduce some of the basic conflicts in policing identified

earlier. Thus, it should recognize the multifaceted nature of the police function; the limited capacity of the police; the need to set realistic goals for impacting specific problems; the importance of reducing public expectations; the imperative need to make more selected use of the criminal justice system; the value of early preventive intervention; the importance of recognizing discretion and providing guidance for its use; the need to engage the community and other social networks in partnerships with the police; and the role of the police, given the nature of their work, in identifying and diagnosing problems that arise in the community and referring them to those who can best deal with them.

How does all of this tie to more traditional forms of change in policing that concentrated on provisions relating to personnel, organizational arrangements, equipment and operating procedures?

Problem-oriented policing depends for its effectiveness on changes in these areas as well. But the changes proposed in these areas (in organization, supervision, recruitment, training and performance evaluation) differ from past proposals in their emphasis. They are more sharply formulated to support the primary goal of the larger exercise, which is to improve the capacity of the police to solve community problems. A high priority is thus attached to introducing greater flexibility in the organization and to decentralizing decision-making. A new style of management and supervision is advocated that places much less emphasis on control and much more on motivating and helping subordinates to become involved in efforts to improve the police response to problems. The role of individual police officers is redefined, giving officers greater freedom, trusting them more, utilizing their previously untapped expertise and skills, and enabling them to thereby contribute more directly to improving police effectiveness.

It should be apparent from this abbreviated description that problem-oriented policing, unlike what is conveyed by the common, simplified references to it as "problem-solving," involves much more than identifying and analyzing problems and developing creative responses to them. More broadly, it is a way of thinking about the police job. Fully developed, it has some bearing on all aspects of police operations. And through its multifaceted approach, the concept is intended to have some impact on each of the conflicts previously identified—to reduce or resolve them in an integrated manner. This is admittedly an ambitious, difficult, and, some would even say, awesome task, but I would argue that attempting to carry it out—with a constant eye on the end product of policing—is preferable to the single-purpose, targeted reforms of the past that

were often unrelated to what it is that the police are actually expected to do. Many of us have witnessed—and even been a part of—efforts, for example, to change the nature of police training, develop leadership, or change recruitment standards, all with the naive belief that leverage applied in a concentrated manner at a critical point will change the entire police establishment. All of these efforts are aimed at critical needs, and the finite resources available at any given time may require a choice from among them, but the results have been disappointing. To be successful and to survive, change in policing requires, first and foremost, clarification of the function and then, with the benefit of greater clarity, that all elements of the police establishment be engaged; that modifications in one area—whether in the organization, in staffing, in the law, or in the community—be coordinated with those in another.

What has been the experience in implementing problem-oriented policing? As first conceived, it was assumed that problems would be analyzed at the administrative level; that agencies, through a revitalized and expanded research and planning unit—much like a product research unit in the private sector—would carry out primary responsibility for researching problems. But the police saw a potential in the concept that was quite different. They came up with the idea that individual police officers, at the operating level, could profitably engage in problem solving. This moved us quickly from a narrower concept that contemplated rigorous exploration of large-scale, jurisdiction-wide problems at the administrative level to a broader concept that included focusing on more localized problems at the beat level. Of necessity, decentralized problem-solving required less rigorous forms of inquiry. Efforts were made to train officers at the beat level in the collection of relevant data and in an eclectic form of analysis. And they were given the freedom, based on their analysis, to design and implement innovative responses.

This unanticipated early modification in the development of problem-oriented policing—the application of problem-solving at the beat level—has been a mixed blessing. In many respects, it led to a rich expansion of the initial effort to introduce a new focus into policing; and it accounts for much of the popularity of problem-oriented policing. Hundreds of departments have addressed a wide array of different problems with a broad range of new strategies. The downside is that this problem-solving at the beat level has drawn attention away from the critical need to engage in more studied, disciplined research on the substantive problems police confront.

Having noted this major shift in focus, what, on reflection, can be said about the collective efforts to implement problem-oriented policing to date? “Problem-solving”

and, to a lesser degree, "problem-oriented policing" have clearly become part of the vocabulary of American policing. The new federal crime legislation, which makes millions of dollars available to local police agencies, calls for the implementation of problem-oriented policing along with community policing. Those working on change in policing often use hyphens to connect the two terms, as in community-problem-solving. But all of this verbiage does not translate into meaningful implementation. I am often embarrassed by what are referred to, in the field, as examples of problem-oriented policing. I learned a long time ago that the cost of advocating a complex concept, in as diverse and decentralized a field as American policing, is its vulnerability to being so diluted, corrupted, and trivialized on implementation that some implementation efforts bear no relationship to the original idea. And it is disheartening when one recognizes how easily these superficial efforts can be used to discredit the larger concept; how justifiable criticism of them may have the effect of stamping out the modest, but genuine accomplishments of dedicated officers and departments.

This is especially worrisome because, amidst all of the claims of accomplishment under the problem-oriented policing umbrella, there are many solid, well informed, and carefully developed—occasionally even dazzling—efforts at implementation. Some departments have indeed embraced the concept as their way of doing business and are working hard to spread it throughout their agencies and to implement it in all aspects of their operations. In others, a unit, a group of officers, or even individual officers are—absent department-wide efforts—incorporating some elements in their work. Departments with a primary commitment to implementing a form of community policing typically place a high priority, within that effort, on problem-solving. Several efforts at the national level to describe the nature of community policing incorporate problem-solving as an essential component. More important than this evidence of change, police are talking much more about substantive problems and rank-and-file officers are increasingly engaged in thinking about what they do and are exploring new ways to strengthen their effectiveness.

Although one can now identify some police agencies that are well advanced in implementing problem-oriented policing, the stronger evidence of progress can be found in specific problem-solving efforts. This is apparent at the annual national conference on problem-oriented policing, co-sponsored by the Police Executive Research Forum and the San Diego Police Department, where the accounts of individual problem-solving efforts have consistently been more impressive than reports on department-wide

implementation efforts. A department may showcase a solid example of problem-solving even though the department itself can claim little success in institutionalizing the concept.

As one would expect in the embryonic stage of so new a concept, a review of specific problem solving efforts reveals a great range of quality, especially in the depth of the effort. Some claims are rather mundane, reflecting little more than what in the past would have been considered "going the extra mile" in taking care of an incident. Others, however, provide quite striking illustrations of what can be achieved. Consider, for example, this problem-solving efforts in San Diego.

Two officers were assigned permanently to a neighborhood in which street prostitution had been a long-standing problem. They undertook—over a period of several months—to study the problem: the characteristics of the prostitutes and their customers; the varied interests of local businesses and residents; the pattern of prostitution; and past efforts at dealing with the problem.

Having identified a group of prostitutes who most commonly frequent the area, they then explored the feasibility of obtaining injunctions that would restrain the conduct associated with their solicitation. Using the records of prior convictions of the prostitutes and documentation of their current activities, the officers engaged the merchants in the area in petitioning a local court for restraining orders and, ultimately the issuance of injunctions that specifically prohibited the named individuals from engaging in specified behavior commonly associated with solicitation. Under threat of being held in contempt, the enjoined prostitutes left the area. The merchants, brought together through this action facilitated by the police, were left stronger as a community. The officers made inquiries—before and after—about the volume of business, the hours merchants were keeping their businesses open, and the investment being made in private security measures. On the basis of their observation of street activities and these measures, they concluded that prostitution was dramatically reduced, and the area, in its use and economy, was revitalized.

On hearing this example, those primarily concerned with evaluating innovations in policing will immediately rush to critique the depth of the analysis, or the quality of the officers' measurement of their effectiveness, or will inquire about displacement in ways

that suggest that, if it occurred, the value of the whole effort is negated. I see something quite different in the effort: two rank-and-file officers who took on a problem rather than resign themselves to responding ineffectually as police have in the past; a recognition of the need to look to other than arrest and prosecution; a commitment to thoughtful analysis; a willingness to explore new alternatives; an effort to engage the community; and an awareness of the need, if not sophistication in the methodology, for evaluating their efforts. Is this a perfect case study, satisfying all of our desired goals? Clearly, some elements are missing. Was their response an improvement over past responses? For those who have sought to bring about change in policing, the answer is emphatically yes.

Officers given the license to explore new alternatives have been extraordinarily creative in their use of a wide range of methods for preventing or reducing problems, including altering the physical environment, creating new systems of surveillance, mediating disputes, involving the community, confronting violators, establishing new programs, employing the civil law, and bringing other municipal services or regulatory agencies to bear.

Feedback from police suggests that one explanation for the popularity of problem-solving is that it provides officers with a higher degree of satisfaction in their job; that, in contrast with the role of beat officers as automatons limited in what they are authorized to do, problem-solving officers enjoy greater independence and are free to use that independence and their inherent skills and knowledge to deal creatively with recurring problems with which they are intimately familiar and which may well have frustrated them in the past. And they can do so in ways that produce quick results; that appear effective to both them and the community they serve. Thus, in contrast with what appear to the officers as more amorphous concepts, problem-oriented policing is often seen as having a pragmatic value; and it carries none of the baggage associated with community policing (which is often seen as requiring an acknowledgment of inadequacy and criticism and as a surrender of some decision-making authority to the community). Still another propelling factor behind problem-oriented policing is the enormous increase we have experienced in the U.S. in the use of the criminal justice system. Because that system is so overwhelmed—so congested—even the most veteran officers (traditional but wisely practical) are increasingly inclined to support prevention and to seek out new ways in which to get the police job done.

In this period when it appears there is so much interest in problem-oriented policing, what might be done in the U.S. to realize more fully the goals inherent in the concept?

Five needs stand out as most urgent.

- (1) **Emphasis must be placed on the all-embracing, holistic nature of the concept. Efforts are not likely to take root unless appropriate changes are made, for example, in leadership, in defining the role of officers, in the reward system, in supervision, in recognizing discretion, and especially in taking charge of the police workload so that time is made available for working on substantive problems at all levels in the organization.**
- (2) **The need for problem solving at higher levels in the organization must be better met. Police agencies—especially those serving large urban areas— must develop the capacity to research substantive jurisdiction-wide problems. To achieve maturity, the policing field must be producers of its own research. Departments must develop the commitment and the skills necessary to examine their end product in a critical manner, using methodologies that will give credibility to their findings. Police leadership must solicit the help of outside resources to assist in conducting needed research.**
- (3) **The capacity of individual police officers to engage in problem-solving at the beat level must be strengthened by improving their ability to analyze problems. Today, officers engaged in problem-solving at the beat level often move rapidly from identifying a problem to implementing a new response without investing in the critically important analysis stage in between. The primary objective of the process—the generation of fresh perspectives and novel responses based on the analysis of hard facts—is therefore not realized. Filling this gap requires the development of instructional materials, including high quality case studies.**
- (4) **Appropriate methods must be developed for evaluating problem-solving efforts. Although the four steps commonly cited in describing problem solving (the SARA model) make a commitment, in the fourth step, to evaluation, this step has been given short shrift or is almost totally ignored. Claims of success are often made. In some cases, these claims are so apparent for everyone to see, they are indisputable. But they are rarely documented. In most problem-solving, however, claims of success are unmeasured and unsupported. Although it will never be feasible (nor would it be desirable) to require a rigorous evaluation of each problem-solving effort, especially at the beat level, much more has to be done to sensitize the police to the need to assess impact and, where feasible, to measure and to document. The need increases with problem-solving at higher**

levels in the organization, especially if the results of analysis lead to major changes in policies and practices affecting the community.

- (5) Regional, state, and federal support should be developed for dealing with substantive problems. One of the major costs of our commitment to organizing police service in the U.S. locally is that many agencies are not large enough to meet the needs of modern-day policing. Such agencies will require the support of regional, state, and sometimes federal efforts in developing their capacity to engage in substantive research. But one of the benefits of a decentralized system is that agencies operating independent from each other are often the source of rich ideas. As for these, regional, state, and federal support is needed to assemble these ideas, to test them in a larger context, and to disseminate the results to other agencies.

Change in American policing or, for that matter, in any institution is not neat. It is likely to be stressful and uneven, with periodic spurts and frequent relapses. Ideas come and go. Programs carrying labels, such as problem oriented policing or community policing, are popularized and, as a consequence, are subject to being diluted and corrupted. Partial, superficial or merely cosmetic efforts at implementation must be anticipated—and will fall prey to criticism, as well they should. In the big picture, these efforts are not entirely wasted so long as—taken together—they advance the capacity of the field to meet fundamental needs. Returning to the points I made at the outset, in policing these fundamental needs are of two kinds: (1) the need to reduce the conflicts between the image and reality of police work by facing reality and (2) the need to learn more about the problems that constitute police business—the nature of those problems and what can be done about them. New programs, under different labels and with different configurations, are likely to come along in an effort to meet these needs. That is all for the good. We spin our wheels and lose ground only if new proposals are primarily tied to the mythology of policing. However attractively they may be packaged, we can no longer afford to invest in reinforcing the glorified, but unreal, image of policing; in doing more of the same.

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