



Conclusion

How Will We Know If Problem-Oriented Policing Works?

The ultimate test of problem-oriented policing is whether it proves successful in enhancing police service. One can evaluate the progress of problem-oriented policing in several different ways. At a minimum, asking whether problem-oriented policing works, and asking whether the problem-oriented policing movement has been successful, are separate matters. The former relates to the ultimate outcomes of policing. It is a search for proof that the problem-solving methodology reduces crime and disorder, makes communities safer, and does so better than any other approach to policing.¹⁶⁰ The latter relates to the process of implementing problem-oriented policing. It is a search for proof that problem-oriented policing has become the standard approach to policing. I will address each in turn.

Asking whether problem-oriented policing works is tantamount to asking whether the police are effective in achieving their socially mandated objectives. This depends, of course, on what one believes to be the objectives of the police. If one uses Goldstein's eight objectives, discussed earlier, as a guide, the matter is indeed quite complex. Successful policing, in the broadest sense, is policing that achieves each objective. If there are competing and, at times, conflicting objectives, as Goldstein argues there are, then there can be no such thing as maximally effective policing.¹⁶¹ In addressing a particular community problem or handling some incident, the police often must compromise some objectives to fully achieve others (e.g., the police must block traffic to allow for a political demonstration, or the police must release a suspect because they cannot obtain evidence without violating the suspect's constitutional rights). Thus, there can be only optimally effective policing, meaning that the police have balanced their objectives.

At the microlevel, one can determine problem-oriented policing's success only in a problem-specific way; that is, the best answer to the question of how one measures success in problem-oriented policing is "one problem at a time" (to play on Morgan Stanley Dean Witter's marketing slogan: "We measure success one investor at a time."). One should assess police effectiveness with respect to each discrete social problem the police are at least partially responsible for addressing.¹⁶²

Because problems of crime, disorder and fear arise and abate through a complex interaction of social norms, laws and technology, there really can be no end point to policing.¹⁶³ As one class of problems abates, new classes of problems arise. An obvious example is the

¹⁶⁰Sherman et al.'s exhaustive review of crime prevention research (1997) concluded that problem-oriented policing has proven promising as an approach to preventing crime and disorder, more so than community policing. Sherman correctly points out that problem-oriented policing is "essentially about insight, imagination and creativity," and the scientific method itself. Thus, it is a fundamentally sound approach that does not depend on any one crime prevention theory for its viability.

¹⁶¹Mastrofski (1999) also argues that talk about the "bottom line" in policing is difficult, because there are competing and conflicting objectives.

¹⁶²Some evaluators of problem-oriented policing measure impacts at a level of aggregation that does not correspond to the level of the problem-solving interventions (for example, the police respond to a highly specific problem, using a highly specific intervention, and the evaluators measure the intervention's impact based on the area's aggregate crime rate). This was the case in an evaluation of problem-oriented policing in Lawrence, Mass. (Bazemore and Cole 1994). Rosenbaum and Lurigio (1998) attempted to review the evaluations of problem-oriented policing and draw conclusions from them, but, in my opinion, also confused the appropriate levels of aggregation and focus of evaluation. Jesilow et al. (1998) acknowledged that one should measure effectiveness at a problem-specific level, but themselves adopted more-abstract levels of measurement in their study of problem-oriented policing in Santa Ana, Calif. Stockdale, Whitehead and Gresham (1999) concluded that applying economic analyses to policing activities made the most sense at the project or initiative level, and less so at more abstract levels.

¹⁶³It may turn out that the search for definitive measures of effectiveness and causation in the realm of crime control and policing is in vain if conventional social science methods are employed in that search. Complex systems, which antisocial behavior and the efforts to control it surely are, may demand an entirely different scientific method than static systems that merely react to forces rather than adapt to them (Waldrop 1992, Lewin 1992). A full exploration of this possibility is well beyond the scope of this work, but it is a highly important possibility.



entirely new class of problems the police face with the rise of the Internet as a means of conducting business and communicating. Indeed, police work is always described in the present participle—*policing*—and never in the past tense. A community is never considered to have been *policed*. Thus, while it is appropriate to judge problem-oriented policing by the degree to which it is effective in addressing society's current problems, one should also judge it by the degree to which it prepares the police to identify and respond to future problems.

¹⁶⁴Capowich and Roehl (1994) used problem-specific measures of effectiveness in their study of problem-oriented policing in San Diego, as did Hope (1994) in his study of problem-oriented policing in St. Louis. Perhaps too many police agencies remain focused on measuring the quality of their efforts to implement the administrative systems that support problem-oriented policing—the training, information systems, supervision styles, performance measurement tools, personnel selection processes, records systems, etc.—and insufficiently focus on the quality of their efforts to do problem-oriented policing—the quality of their problem identification, analysis, response, and assessment. Wrote Mark Moore, “Thus the mark of an effective police department will not be how successful it is in implementing the most recent national model of a successful program, but instead, in how thoughtfully it crafts a local solution to a local problem, taking into account the local character of the problem and the local means of dealing with it” (1998).

One can claim the problem-oriented policing movement has succeeded once police agencies have integrated the problem-solving operational strategy of police work into their operations at least as completely as they have the other operational strategies of preventive patrol, routine incident response, emergency response, and criminal investigation. Once integrated, each operational strategy will always have room for improvement. One can make this assessment of the success of the problem-oriented policing movement with respect to particular police agencies as well as to the profession as a whole.¹⁶⁴

In addition, one can claim the problem-oriented policing movement has succeeded once the imbalance between policing's “means” and “ends” has been altered to better reflect a direct concern on the part of police administrators and researchers with the substantive aspects of police business. In his early writings on the concept, Goldstein (1981) identified several areas of police administration and research where this imbalance needed to be corrected:

- a. police administration texts,
- b. police conferences,
- c. police administration and criminal justice university curricula,
- d. police training programs,
- e. police chief selection criteria,
- f. police chief calendars,
- g. police journal content,
- h. state planning agency agendas,
- i. substantive policymaking participation, and
- j. police research-unit agendas.

While there has been some move toward a greater substantive focus, it is my distinct impression that all the areas listed above still primarily have an administrative and organizational focus, to the exclusion of a focus on the substantive problems the police confront.

As is probably true in all fields, the development of an important idea, or of several important ideas simultaneously, is not neat and clean. There is no central policymaking entity, at least not in American



policing. Scholars and practitioners alike shift through time in their understanding and support of the various ideas. The ideas themselves are shaped by factors other than pure theory or tested practice: by political and popular interest, available funding and the desire to achieve distinction. While the uneven and sometimes contradictory way these various movements push and pull the police profession frustrates those who are committed to one idea or another, in the long run, this is for the best. It is best for society as a whole, and best for the problem-oriented policing movement. The diversity of ideas and the highly decentralized way they are implemented have ultimately led to refinement of the best of them. Were it even possible for the development of problem-oriented policing to be centralized and made more consistent, it would likely weaken the idea. A single wrong turn in centralized policymaking results in many wrong turns in police practice. There are risks to promoting homogeneity in the implementation of problem-oriented policing, whether through the requirements of federal funding programs or through other means. An idea such as problem-oriented policing, which has yet to be fully developed, needs diversity to grow. And so it is that problem-oriented policing competes in the messy marketplace of ideas about how to improve policing.

Problem-oriented policing must pass the rigorous tests of academic scrutiny and criticism to prevail as a path for improving policing. To be tested properly, it must be implemented with at least basic fidelity to the fundamental principles laid out by Herman Goldstein. Goldstein never intended that problem-oriented policing, at least as he articulated it, be understood as a finished or definitive product. Indeed, according to the scholar Jean-Paul Brodeur: “[I]t would seem as difficult as it is futile to measure with precision the extent to which the new strategy has been implemented. Such a measurement implies freezing a paradigm that is characterized by its open-endedness” (1998b). Goldstein intended that problem-oriented policing be understood as a basic framework to be tested, refined and improved on.

Problem-oriented policing has come a long way in 20 years, from the chalkboards and classrooms of the University of Wisconsin, to the squad rooms, community meeting halls and conference rooms where modern policing is played out. It has achieved a degree of professional interest, and some measure of public and political interest, that must be heartening to Herman Goldstein and those who believe in his idea.¹⁶⁵ The development of problem-oriented policing, however, is far from complete. Ironically, the popularity of the idea puts it at risk of burning out, and that would be unfortunate.¹⁶⁶ It is precisely because problem-oriented policing is so deeply rooted in what Goldstein calls the basic arrangements for policing in a free and open

¹⁶⁵As Toch and Grant so aptly concluded:

Problem-oriented policing cannot afford to be insensitive to public sentiment, but it must have faith in the process whereby its solutions are derived. The point of such faith is not to ignore popular opinion, but to subordinate getting along to doing right, where facts and fashions differ. The dangers of not doing so are illustrated by past experiences, such as the saga of team policing, which was often aborted (prematurely) because it had been instituted as a gambit and not as an intervention responsive to an analysis of needs. Sentiments (in the case of team policing, the fear of riots) are often evanescent, while needs (such as the slum conditions that sparked riots) stay around and remain unmet. The fact that problem-oriented policing is now “in” should please us, but we must not confuse this fact with the reasons why the reform makes sense, which existed before the strategy was “in”...and should remain long after drug-related pressures subside (1991:285-86).

¹⁶⁶Gilling offered a number of important reminders and cautions about using scientific or quasi-scientific research methods to make public policy as problem-oriented policing prescribes. He correctly noted that every step of the problem-solving process involves what are essentially political judgments about what problems are important, what facts are to be gathered, and what conclusions are correct. He concluded:

Followed correctly, [the problem-oriented approach] provides the best opportunity of making a significant and lasting impact upon the growing levels of crime that have been a characteristic feature of most of the postwar developed world, and thus it offers liberation from the “nothing works” pessimism that still lies beneath the surface of crime control discourse. However, given its tenuous position as a relatively new paradigm, the problem-oriented approach cannot afford to underestimate the strength of the opposition manifested in traditional perspectives, alternative agendas, and the limitation of existing data sources and interpretative frameworks. There is a considerable amount of pressure being exerted on the problem-oriented approach to be stretched in a particular political direction (1996:21).



society—the most fundamental challenges for establishing domestic tranquility and order—that police, community and government officials can ill afford to rest comfortably on the progress made to date.