



# Program Evaluation

## Summary

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### Community policing

# Police and community problem solving in Chicago

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**T**his evaluation summary highlights findings from the 2002 study of Chicago's Alternative Policing Strategy (CAPS). The results focus on problem solving as one of the core elements of CAPS. As in many cities, problem solving is one of the key components of Chicago's community policing program. A "problem" is defined as a group of related incidents or situations that concern a significant portion of those who live or work in a particular area. Problems are also persistent: they are unlikely to disappear without an intervention of some significance, because they typically have survived routine efforts of the police to

resolve them. Because they are persistent, repeated incidents probably share causes, so dealing with their underlying sources may prevent future problems. While dealing with crime remains at the heart of the police mission, problems can include a broad range of community concerns. They range from noise to the dilapidated condition of many of the city's older rental buildings, and include a host of social disorders and a broad range of code enforcement matters. In Chicago, community input and discussion at beat meetings are factored into the identification of priority problems by the police.

While problem solving has been widely praised as a significant advance in American policing, surprisingly little is known about exactly what police really do when they try to solve problems. During the summer of 2002, the CAPS evaluation conducted a study examining how Chicago police tackle neighborhood problems. A sample of 68 problem sites was



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*The full 2002 report, "Community Policing in Chicago, Years Eight and Nine," and copies of earlier reports can be found at the Institute for Policy Research website ([www.Northwestern.edu/IPR/policing.html](http://www.Northwestern.edu/IPR/policing.html)) or they can be requested from the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority.*

drawn from a database of all of the beat problems that had been officially prioritized by police. The study focused on the problems that were most often identified as local priorities: drugs, gangs, property crime, and social disorder. Interviews, field observations, and archival data were examined to (a) reconstruct what actions police and residents took at each site, and (b) assess the success of their problem-solving efforts.

### How do police try to solve problems?

What did police and residents do about problems on their beat? To examine this, we inspected beat plans, conducted personal interviews with police and knowledgeable residents, and made our own observations of the sites. Because they each had different experiences upon which to draw, everyone we interviewed was asked to describe actions undertaken both by police and by residents. Not surprisingly, police knew more about police efforts, and community members knew more about community activities, but each had information to share about the other. Only strategies that were described by at least two respondents were counted, for we had more confidence when informants agreed about what was happening in their beat. Police and residents commonly were involved in numerous problem-solving strategies at any one time.

Most police problem solving was quite traditional in character. The most common police strategy was high-visibility patrol; this category included directed patrol, rapid 911 response, special mission cars and other efforts to establish a police presence in an area, and these were utilized in 87 percent of the study areas. In 59 percent of beats police tried to increase arrests or issue more citations. Aggressive stops were employed in 38 percent of the sites. These included intensive traffic stops and traffic enforcement; warrant, name and license checks; field interrogations; intensive use of administrative violation notices; undercover “buy-bust” operations; and dispersal orders issued under the city’s gang and drug loitering ordinance.

Nontraditional policing strategies were also described fairly often, particularly for property crime (in 76 percent of those beats) but also for half of the social disorder sites. It was common to encounter prevention awareness programs run by police officers, especially for property crimes such as burglary and theft from autos. Police also worked with businesses

to prevent property crime. Police were described as working with residents at beat meetings, talking with residents, and using code enforcement and other tools to attack social disorder. Nontraditional police tactics were much less common in gang and drug areas. There, street roll calls – which flood trouble spots with officers and maximize police visibility – were the most common nontraditional tactic.

Everyone who was interviewed was also asked about community involvement in the problem. Gang and drug sites were home to most of the block club organizing (57 percent) and community marches and patrols (29 percent) we encountered. As on the police side, community-led educational campaigns were commonly described (44 percent) in property crime areas. Community organizing, patrols, “positive loitering” campaigns, programs with businesses, and educational campaigns were the most frequent community efforts against social disorder.

City agencies were also frequently involved in problem solving; overall, they were described as contributing to solving problems in 63 percent of beats. The Department of Streets and Sanitation predominated, for the bulk of the services were street lighting projects, cleanups, trimming trees and bushes, car tows, graffiti removal and sidewalk repairs. Our informants also frequently noted involvement by the city’s CAPS Implementation

Office. This office is involved in both mobilizing residents for marches, vigils and beat meetings, and in organizing coordinated city service projects in blighted areas. Overall, CAPS Implementation Office staff were a visible presence in 54 percent of the problem sites.

Rating sheets completed by police and residents added an additional piece of information about their problem-solving strategies – the frequency with which they were employed. Police used traditional tactics more frequently than nontraditional ones, for every type of problem. For example, in the average beat they drove through social disorder sites “to establish a police presence” an average of 3.4 times per week, but contacted a city agency or used a service request form to get action on the problem less than once a week. Residents were somewhat more likely to rely on city agencies or their alderman to solve their problems than they were to get directly involved themselves.

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They were least active in tackling property crime problems.

### Was problem solving successful?

The success of these problem-solving efforts was measured in two ways. The interviews with neighborhood residents and police included questions about the problems and what had happened since they were identified as priorities. We also utilized data from the police department's 911 center and crime reports filed by officers. These have the advantage of extending backward in time. Using both kinds of data, we compared the selected beats with similar comparison areas to see if trends differed. Because crime rates have been dropping in Chicago for the past decade, the fact that these numbers went down in a beat over time is not, by itself, strong evidence that problem solving made a difference.

Our respondents rated problem trends in their beat on four dimensions. Two "outcome successes" were measured by reports of the frequency and the consequences of the targeted problems. Problem frequency was measured by questions about its volume and the number of people involved in it. Among the consequence measures was the problem's impact on area families, other crime generated by the problem, and its impact on passers-by. Police and residents also rated changes in resident involvement in problem solving and satisfaction with police efforts. Increased community involvement is known as a problem solving "process success," an outcome that in particular cannot be measured by crime statistics. The police and residents we interviewed generally agreed about trends in their beats, so their responses were combined into summary measures for each area. Overall, they reported the most success with reducing social disorder, followed closely by property crime. They reported much less success with gang and drug problems. Police and residents were more successful in reducing the visibility of problems than they were the frequency of the problems they were working on. They reported particular difficulty in sustaining resident involvement in tackling gang and drug problems, and in limiting the impact of these crimes on area families and on the other crimes that these problems generate.

Time series trends in appropriate categories of calls for service and recorded crime data were created for each problem site. For example, if the beat priority was house burglary, the crime trend data included burglaries of residential dwellings. Comparable data were assembled for matched sets of beats in which the sample problem was not identified as a priority. These trends provided a general baseline for assessing trends in the problem beats, serving as "control areas" for

each problem site selected for study. Crime data were aggregated from information on 3.9 million individual crime incidents that were reported during the 78 months between January 1996 and June 2002. The 911 data were aggregated from 23.4 million calls to the City of Chicago's Emergency Communications Center during the 40 months between January 1999 and April 2002.

Two measures of success were examined. The first was whether or not crime went down. This involved a simple comparison of levels of crime targeted by beat officers before and after they identified it as a priority. The second measure of success was based on a complex statistical analysis of trends in both the study beats and their matched comparison areas. A Box-Jenkins Intervention Analysis was conducted of each time series. It distinguished between gradual and immediate changes in crime, and whether those changes were – through June 2002 – temporary or permanent in nature. Most importantly, it gauged the significance of changes in the study areas in comparison to the matched areas, to determine if trends in the study beats were unique or simply resembled trends in similar areas of the city.

In all, recorded crime was down in 52 percent of the study beats, and 911 calls were down in only 8 percent. The latter reflects the fact that there has been a steady, citywide rise in 911 calls despite generally declining crime rates. Thus the critical question for both measures was whether or not the problems targeted by police were more under control than they were in similar areas where they were not the focus of concerted police action. The analysis of recorded crime that took into account trends in matched areas pointed to success in 44 percent of the study beats; for 911 calls the success rate was 52 percent. Measured by recorded crime, problem solving was most successful in property crime areas, where there was a 50 percent success rate. Residents' calls to 911 about social disorder problems were virtually unaffected by problem-solving efforts in their beat, while the pattern of 911 calls pointed to positive results in two-thirds of the drug sites.

One interpretation of these findings is that the problem solving "glass" in Chicago is roughly "half full." However, it is important to note that the problems we examined were prioritized in the first place because they had already resisted routine efforts to solve them. In the language of CAPS, they were "chronic" crime and disorder problems. In this light, a 44-to-52 percent success rate when judged against trends in comparable areas should be seen in a quite positive light.

## What worked where?

The final question is, what is the relationship between what police and residents did and the outcomes they achieved? To examine this, we merged the findings presented above. Measures of problem-solving strategies and activity levels of police and residents were compared with the outcomes they reported and the results of the statistical analysis of crime trends. In drug and gang sites, community activism and nontraditional police strategies and activities were associated with improved neighborhood conditions. So, too, was the involvement of the CAPS Implementation Office in gang and drug projects. In the case of property crime, educational strategies and levels of nontraditional police activity (which involved information gathering, using city services and dealing with building managers) were linked to outcome and process successes. Community activism and educational strategies were linked to reductions in recorded property crime, as were both traditional and nontraditional policing strategies. For social disorder, both traditional and non-traditional policing were linked to declines in citizen complaints via 911; efforts by the CAPS Implementation Office and reports of assistance from government agencies' were also linked to posi-

tive trends in social disorder. In general, community strategies and activities, and nontraditional policing, was more consistently related to improving neighborhood conditions than were conventional police enforcement efforts. Ironically, our analysis of the frequency of these activities indicated that effective strategies were used less often than conventional ones that seemed to be less effective.■



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