examiner.com

Barrie J. Ritter, Ph.D. ©2016

LIFE / SOCIETY & CULTURE / SOCIAL ISSUES

Why more police patrols will not reduce homicides: An evidence-based argument

Barrie J. Ritter, Ph.D.© 2016

The number of police patrols
Photo by Alex Wong/Getty Images

In the wake of a number of riot-promoting, interracial killings emanating from urban officers, resulting in the deaths of young blacks, police administrators and city officials have begun to seriously question the wisdom of saturating poor minority communities with largely white police patrols. The explicit mission of these community patrols — to make large numbers of arrests for petty offenses such as loitering, panhandling and vagrancy — was based on an idea called "broken windows." (The idea was first articulated in a **1982 Atlantic Monthly article by George Kelling and James Q. Wilson**). Broken windows is a type of community policing that is often accompanied by a policy of "zero tolerance" for anyone contributing to incivilities or other signs of urban decay, disorder and lawlessness. Criminologists seem to think of this as a debate over who should control public spaces: Should they be left "uncontrolled" and lawless, or should the poorest sections of a city be placed under the presence of heavy, aggressive patrol?

In cities where community patrol has been implemented, much of what police do is left to their own discretion. They *are* encouraged, however, to pile up arrests through stop and frisk procedures for offenses that are so minor, few will ever be prosecuted (**Miller, 1996**). One thing is clear: The notion that "community

policing" means the police and the community work together has rarely been the case. It can hardly be expected to be otherwise in areas where, for instance, police may make 52,000 stops (AKA "Stop, Question, Frisk,") within four years, in an 8 block area "but recover only 25 guns." And that was when getting guns off the streets was supposedly the most urgent objective of the police (**Rivera, Baker & Roberts, July 11, 2010**).

Anecdotally, driving through the suppressive police zone of East San Diego, in the early 1980s, was an unforgettable experience even if you made it through without being stopped. If you imagine that community as your home, the police would have been seen as an occupying force. Kelling and Wilson (1982) claim that *they* would not mind a reduction in liberties, because this type of community control will ultimately lead to a reduction in more serious crimes —such as murder. But there is no reason to think the petty offenders are also the murderers. And the authors will never live in a poor community, so what they "wouldn't mind" is irrelevant.

Like "three strikes," aggressive patrol is only concerned with the least difficult-to-solve cases and some of the least serious crimes. The laws on three strikes in California specify 7 offenses including fencing stolen property and drug possession, but murder is not one of them. Kelling and Coles (1996) criticize this policy for its punitive application of manpower, whereas their own notion of community patrol is purportedly "preventive." Yet it is the latter that is so oppressive any resident can be arrested at any time, so how is this non-punitive – or preventative?

The issue really boils down to how and where police manpower is deployed.

There are two reasons why police manpower is a particularly critical issue at the moment:

First, a number of highly publicized killings of minorities by white police officers have again raised the specter of police violence. This is an issue that has rarely been publicly addressed since the 1991 Rodney King incident. Since little happened in the aftermath of King, we have to go back to the late 1960s-70s to find a time when the nation was focused on the issue, when national commission reports (e.g. **the Kerner Report, National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, July 1967**) were actually read by academics and some of the public. It was perhaps the only time when recommendations for reducing racial tension in minority communities were widely publicized and had the slightest possibility of being implemented.

That was also a period when, for the first time, a number of studies were done on the effectiveness of police in investigating crimes (e.g. **Greenwood, Chaiken & Petersilia, 1977**), including how little detectives brought to the process, and how the role of patrol officers relative to detectives might be enhanced. There were studies of the usefulness of computers, the importance of police "response times," and whether vehicular patrols were safer for police than "walking the beat." These studies, some independent, but many sponsored by the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA, which later became the National Institute of Justice, NIJ) provide the only evidence-based results on what works relative to police, yet the results of such studies are rarely part of any curriculum – whether academic or law enforcement-oriented. Nor are their results brought to the table when, today, police are asking in front-page headlines for new solutions, when there is a crisis in faith about where so much of current police resources go.

The second reason why police manpower is such a critical issue, is that many believe that criticism of police in the aftermath of high profile killings has led to reductions in both police presence and in mass arrests. The

argument is that civil disturbances after controversial killings have led police to fear the loss of their total discretion and become more wary and less active, which, in turn, has produced a rise in homicides in some big cities. This has been called "**the Ferguson effect**". The issue here is should the police, who have the only job where the use of force is accepted and almost expected, have their behavior reviewed when force is used in questionable cases? Are we simply to believe that police are in total control of themselves, never biased, never mistaken? If no man is above the law, why shouldn't those who carry out the law, be required to obey it too?

Ultimately, the most important reason why more police patrols will not reduce crime can be found in **The Kansas City Preventative Patrol Experiment: A Summary Report (Kelling, Pate, Dieckman & Brown, 1974)**. The Police Foundation and the Kansas City Police Department began the experiment in 1972. They systematically varied the amount of preventative patroling across areas of Kansas City. In some areas, police patrols were doubled, and in some areas, they were eliminated altogether (except when they were called). After one year, the evaluators of the experiment found that the varying levels of preventative patrol had had no effect whatsoever on crime rates or on citizens' fears. "There was not even any displacement of crime from the highly patrolled areas to the underpatrolled areas," as **Greenwood** (1982, p. 323) wrote. And nothing in the interim has overturned this finding. Perhaps because those who want the option of having police control others, do not want these results to be discovered.

SUGGESTED LINKS

- **Bulging prisons, petty offenses**
- **More guns, fewer mass shootings?**
- **The study of murder to help police**
- **The study of murder to help police: Expanded MO analysis**
- **Marvin Wolfgang: Scientist or king?**

Barrie Ritter
Crime & Justice Examiner