

Letting Foundation

CONNECTIONS

Winter 2006



CONNECTIONS

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Community Politics:

A Lens for Seeing the Whole Story of Kettering Research

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Other studies propose that the sense of community and the common good are being supplanted by self-interest, thus communities become dysfunctional and common problems go unsolved.

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Likewise, the Hamilton County Regional Planning Commission provides us with a third Public-Government research experiment to review anew through the lens of Community Politics and Leadership. In the Fall of 2002, the commission initiated a comprehensive master plan for Hamilton County, Ohio. The core goal was to create this plan using "collaborative decision making" open to the public. HCRPC staff developed "Community COMPASS (Comprehensive Master Plan and Strategies)" which included an issue-framing/public-deliberation component to address the problems of "governance" in the county. This resulted in Hamilton County's first master plan since 1964.

Again, we have here another example of a report that originated in the foundation's Public-Government area migrating to our Community Politics/Leadership work group. Based on the Hamilton County evaluation, David Mathews made this observation about Government Planning and Public Politics: "We have reason to believe that public deliberation produces a broader sense of a problem, which encourages multiple actors. But can those actors produce effective action by each person or each group doing their own thing without attention to enlisting other actors, marshalling resources, considering steps or timetables? If they must, should citizens adopt bureaucratic techniques? Or is there a public way of planning and implementing?"

This essay provides three short examples of past Public-Government research studies that have helped us shed new light on questions from our Community Politics and Leadership program area. More important, it demonstrates that our research projects are "not separate studies, but one research design with multiple components." Thus, from a methodological vantage point, the research capacity of the foundation will only increase when we take a fresh look at previous findings from new perspectives. By relating to past research, new research can build upon past findings and allow us to understand interrelated political phenomena.

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Involving Ordinary Citizens in Public Work: **The Cincinnati Experience**

By Valerie Lemmie

Too many of us have become passive and disengaged. Too many of us lack confidence in our capacity to make basic moral and civic judgments. Rarely have we felt so powerless. In a time that cries out for civic action, we are in danger of becoming a nation of spectators.

*"A Nation of Spectators,"
the Report of the National
Commission on Civic Renewal*

On Saturday, April 7, 2001, at 2:16 a.m., a Cincinnati police officer fatally shot Timothy Thomas in a dark alley in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood. He was unarmed and the fifteenth African American suspect shot by Cincinnati police since 1995. The following Monday, an angry crowd seized control of the City Council's Law and Public Safety Committee meeting and expressed its dissatisfaction with the responses of public officials to the shooting of another unarmed African American male. The crowd demanded answers they felt were not forthcoming. The anger, alienation, and frustration these citizens felt against their city government was palpable and would later be expressed through two days of rioting.

While many in the community were shocked and outraged by the nature and character of the violence, there was general consensus something needed to be done to address the root causes of the civil unrest. What wasn't clear at the time was what should be done, when, by whom, and at what cost.

Subsequently, a variety of groups, organizations and government undertook

many initiatives, programs, and actions. Some initiatives focused on meeting immediate needs while others sought long-term solutions to what seemed to be intractable problems. This time, however, things were different. Voices that heretofore had been seldom heard were part of the discussions on what to do. Those who had been ignored by civic, public, and business interests in the past, and who in 2001 felt their only recourse was to "take to the streets," were now engaged with the larger community in finding solutions to the vexing problems they faced.

Another key difference was a general consensus that finding viable solutions to these problems was the responsibility of the entire community. There was broad recognition government could not solve these problems alone. Government should be a participant, but everyone had to be part of finding solutions.

Using a model referred to as Community Problem Oriented Policing, or CPOP, citizens and police work in neighborhood teams to address key issues and problems. These teams have become an important vehicle for empowering average citizens by giving them a voice and a role to play in addressing issues that directly affect them. They are now active participants in getting the "public's work" done.

One year after the shooting on April 11, 2002, the City of Cincinnati, the Fraternal Order of Police, the American Civil Liberties Union, and a class of citizens represented by the Black United Front signed a historic five-year agreement, known as the Collaborative Agreement, to improve police-community relationships through, among other commitments,

Challenge One

joint police-citizen problem-solving teams. All the parties to this agreement were involved in drafting the language contained in the agreement and in establishing the mutual accountability each party would assume. This was not a top-down process, but a bottom-up process, as it began with citizens articulating problems that needed to be addressed and concluded with an agreement to form problem-solving teams as the means for achieving safer, sustainable communities.

Community Problem Oriented Policing teams are comprised of citizens,

Cincinnati's CPOP teams have been successful because they provide a means for citizens to address those problems that made them angry and feel alienated.

police officers, and city staff who meet regularly to map out ways to reduce crime and the associated violence and economic destabilization which results. Often, other community stakeholders are involved, including faith-based organizations, business owners, and community activists.

The goal of Cincinnati's CPOP initiative is to move responsibility for fighting crime from police alone to a shared responsibility between police and citizens. This is a far more evolved role than citizens have historically been asked to play by their government. In the past, citizens were looked to as the eyes and ears of the police, and they were simply expected to call when there was a problem. This approach to crime fighting is best illustrated with programs like Neighborhood Watch and Crime Stoppers.

CPOP offers a radically different approach as it is grounded in a philosophy of proactive crime fighting—addressing problems before a crime is committed, rather than simply responding through

enforcement after a crime has occurred. For citizens, CPOP means less reliance on police and government and more responsibility for themselves.

There are currently 31 neighborhood CPOP teams (the city has 52 recognized neighborhoods). It is expected that all 52 neighborhoods will have CPOP teams over time. On average, there are 15 citizens involved per team.

In keeping with the theory of Broken Windows, most of the teams are addressing problems of drug trafficking, littering, prostitution, loitering, illegal drinking, and disorderly conduct. A combination of directed code enforcement, specifically tailored police response tactics, environmental barriers, cameras, streetlights, property transfers, and liquor license objections have begun to make visible differences in the quality of life in Cincinnati neighborhoods. This has encouraged more deliberation among citizens, business, and government on other projects and initiatives. Cincinnati's CPOP teams

have been successful because they provide a means for citizens to address those problems that made them feel alienated and angry. The problems the teams work on are those identified by citizens and citizens deliberate with government and others about what to do, how to do it, and when it should be done.

For example, in several neighborhoods, citizens launched letter-writing campaigns in which they complained to property owners about code violations in an effort to alleviate the adverse impact of these derelict properties on the value of their properties and the overall quality of life in their neighborhoods. Whereas judges originally saw such crimes as minor and usually just gave violators a “slap on the wrist,” once citizens got involved, the response from judges was completely different—it became more economical to comply with code requirements than to pay stiff fines, serve a possible jail term, and face public ridicule.

Another example is in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood. Here, a CPOP team

tackled the problem of youth loitering, littering, and selling drugs. Once neighbors got involved and worked with property owners and police to address concerns, the problems ceased. In one instance, residents put up a street banner and signs saying drugs would not be sold here anymore; and they joined police in patrolling their corner, and the drug dealing stopped.

CPOP teams often tackle the “lower hanging fruit” problems first in order to have some quick wins, before they tackle larger problems. For example, in the Kennedy Heights neighborhood the CPOP team sought to stop drug dealers from using a pedestrian bridge to sell drugs. Citizens decided they needed to find a way to make it uncomfortable for the dealers to sit on the bridge while they were waiting for customers. They came up with the idea of making an aesthetic barrier using plastic eggs with concrete poured on one side of them, resulting in bumps that were oval on one side and flat on the other. They then glued them to the bridge. The drug dealing on the bridge stopped.

CPOP teams have not simply drawn up “city-do” lists. Rather, citizens offer their perspectives and suggestions along with those of other community stakeholders, police, and city administrators to offer more comprehensive and creative solutions to problems. Team members have learned that by sharing information, all gain knowledge and, through knowledge, all gain a better understanding of the nature of a problem and the degree to which given problems plague a community. This shared understanding moves the group to deliberation on how best to fix problems. From this understanding comes action—specific steps each party must take to fix a problem.

While much has been accomplished, much remains to be done as the community wrestles with these tough issues and problems. Yet, an important accomplishment has risen out of the chaos of Cincinnati's unrest—a new collaboration between citizens and police directed at a reduction in both crime and disorder.

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The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation—not a grant-giving foundation—rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to “the problems behind the problems.”

The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

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