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DATA AND DISCORD: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ORGANIZATIONAL RESISTANCE TO DATA-BASED REFORM IN POLICING AGENCIES

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The development and implementation of data-based reform and strategy within law enforcement agencies can be useful in improving policing efficacy and renewing public trust in law enforcement, however such reforms can be a catalyst for internal discord within agencies and cause of various organizational morale problems if implemented without input and support from staff. This critical analysis of the literature on the implementation of data-based reforms and strategies is intended to illuminate the challenges of such implementation and forecast possible solutions.

INTRODUCTION

A major organizational change initiative that has been researched in the criminal justice and law enforcement system is the implementation and utilization of computer statistics programs by police in order to provide a data-backed structure to patrol priorities and crime control. These initiatives can be referred to collectively as data-driven policing methods or strategies. Specifically, initiatives such as COMPSTAT, implemented by Commissioner William Bratton in New York City, and the CitiStat program introduced by Mayor (and later Governor) Martin O'Malley in Baltimore, Maryland have been studied by academic researchers (Gullino, 2009). The primary thrust of this research has been into the efficacy and utility of these programs, and to analyze the changes that these initiatives made to police organizations and the communities they protect. In this expository analysis I will demonstrate that these crime statistics programs, and their associated policies and procedures, were a double-edged sword for the leaders and organizations that implemented these programs. While they do seem to result in decreased crime rates for certain categories of crimes, they also tend to increase tensions between public leaders and the communities which see an uptick in their levels of policing, and between leaders of police agencies and the law enforcement officers who report to them. While advocates say that these programs provide a successful data-driven approach to crime reduction, critics say that the crime reduction is minimal and the side-effects both in terms of police morale and public resentment are potentially worse than the benefits.

Indeed, for patrol officers who might be held accountable for crime rates on their specific beat, there may be a disincentive to take police reports in order to create the appearance of a crime reduction for the areas to which they have been assigned (Eterno & Silverman, 2010). Incentivizing dishonesty is a common theme of objection to these programs. Concerns about data manipulation, increased police scrutiny within marginalized communities, and the reduction of reliance on professional expertise in deference to geographic crime statistical data have all contributed to skepticism of these initiatives. I will explore the costs, benefits, and the hurdles to this particular organizational change initiative. Additionally, critical analysis will cover some of the ways those hurdles were handled by the change advocates and public officials, for better or for worse. Data-driven policing strategies involve the collection and recordkeeping of crime locations charted on geographic maps, as well as the categorizing the nature and disposition of each crime, such as the level of violence, and whether it was reported through 911 systems (Fillichio, 2005). But it would be a mistake to assume these policies are just the collection of data, because they are also the intentional utilization of that data in a comparative strategic manner to hold individuals responsible for each geographic region of the jurisdiction (Behn, 2005). For that reason, the most famous data-driven policing model is called COMPSTAT, meaning comparative statistics. Originally introduced by New York City, this system resulted in monthly meetings where police responsible for various sections of the agency's jurisdiction were interrogatively interviewed by the highest-ranking captains and deputy commissioners about any increase or lack of decrease in crime within their responsibility.

This is intended to encourage accountability and robust responses to crime rather than bureaucratic dithering, and slow or noncommittal response by line officers. The spread of this policing strategy was quick, as software developers marketed crime statistic management suites to police agencies across the country, and the globe over the course of the 2000's and beyond.

LITERATURE REVIEW

COMPSTAT and similar programs have been described as innovative, but they do radically alter police organizations that adopt them. One study took a close look at three specific police departments that implemented COMPSTAT: Minneapolis, Minnesota; Newark, New Jersey; and Lowell, Massachusetts (Willis, Mastrofski, & Weisburd, 2007). Among the principal conclusions of that study were that police agencies and their leadership feel pressure from the public and from political forces to appear successful in the prevention of crime, and to produce data that proves their success against crime. From the public side, the pressure originates from one's own sense of wanting to live in a safe community and to have confidence that tax dollars are being spent toward useful purposes rather than toward bloat and unnecessary expense. From the political side, the pressure originates from a sense among public officials that they need to demonstrate tangible and measurable progress to their constituents for the purposes of maintaining their political career and highlighting a record of success while in public office (Willis, Mastrofski, & Weisburd, 2007). However, within the police agencies themselves, the implementation of these new data-driven policies and routines was done in such a manner as to disrupt previous organizational structures and routines in the least radical of manner. This is of particular note because, as the authors note, COMPSTAT is a policy and process that directly competes with another prominent policing reform known as community policing. Community policing is a strategy that encourages officers to interact with all members of the community and build relationships of trust and dialogue that can be relied upon when necessary to conduct investigations. These data-driven methodologies are quite the opposite, refocusing the police strictly on crime control and interdiction, and focusing their energies and resources on the parts of town where crime is more frequent, more severe, and more deadly (Willis, Mastrofski, & Weisburd, 2007).

The complication this study noted was that all three police departments maintained that they believed in community policing and the implementation of COMPSTAT simultaneously, and this caused confusion about what the real strategic role of the police should be in the community. Even police officers in these communities complained that the emphasis on refocusing resources to high crime areas left residents in slightly lower crime areas feeling abandoned and unequally treated, and also increasing the length of time for a response to their 911 calls. Officers also reported feeling that their longstanding community partnerships suffered, and that the statistical system encouraged absurd focus on small or petty crimes in the hope that investigating these crimes more intently would also uncover larger crimes - which does not seem to have been the case. The police took pride in their role being multifaceted and diplomatic, but this reform made them feel more brutish and instigatory (Willis, Mastrofski, & Weisburd, 2007). A dissertation published by a student at Rutgers University highlights the possibility that cultural stubbornness and poor leadership communication have been substantial barriers to the implementation and success of COMPSTAT in police agencies (Yuksel, 2013). While COMPSTAT has high levels of popularity, largely as a result of good news headlines coming from alleged crime reduction in New York City attributed to its usage, the failure rate in implementation can be as high as between 50 to 70 percent (Lewis & Siebold, 1998). Yuskel (2013) describes the COMPSTAT program as the natural evolution of policing from a traditionally ephemeral, intuitive and unresponsive bureaucracy of law enforcement officers toward principles that emphasize metrics, accountability, and key performance indicators - much the same way the corporate and political worlds have trended in

recent decades. But the primary issue with the implementation of these new principles and policies is that the communication plan for initializing the change has often been disjointed, unclear, or at worst, a completely inaccurate description of the program based on misconceptions and misinterpretations. He theorizes that the barriers to change were not taken seriously, and communication was a token and symbolic instead of genuinely intended to persuade skeptical organizational members that it was crucial or important (Yuksel, 2013). The usage of traditional and bureaucratic messaging on a shift in mission and goals as substantial as the implementation of a data-driven program is likely inadequate to the task, and a communication plan that is much more personal, intentional, diplomatic, and systemic would likely work much better (Yuskel, 2013).

The problem may however go far deeper than mere communication challenges, and into the abyss of substantial ethical lapses that are incentivized by the emphasis on numerical accountability. A law review article by St. Louis University Professor James Gilsnan (2012) expresses his despair that numerical accountability (lowering crime numbers) is a "chimera" that causes the intentional hiding of crime, crime reports, crime rates, and crime outcomes by individual law enforcement officers and even systemically within the implementation of a whole police agency. His concern is that while police agencies are eager to implement changes that enable them to tout accountability and achievement, the process of applying numbers can be a fool's errand when there are unavoidable temptations to find ways to massage those numbers in a preferable or beneficial direction. A field commander reporting to his captain has every motive one can imagine to show a reduction in crime within his designated area of patrol. He further despairs that the rapid adoption of these data-driven programs is more akin to the adoption of a fad than a thoughtful reform, and he surmises that this indicates a greater urgency to be seen as effective than to actually be effective (Gilsnan, 2012). Finally, he observes that the institutional environment of police agencies is one of almost radical stubbornness to change, partly because as an institution they do not produce a tangible product, and that police culture has historically been more rigorously controlling than any policy or process (Gilsnan, 2012).

Perhaps the most important question about data-driven policing is the obvious one: whether, for all its faults, it actually decreases crime in the long run. A study that focused exclusively on the municipality of Fort Worth, Texas, and found that it does have a substantial effect on reducing property crime (Jang, Hoover, & Loo, 2010). This paper cited prior research from abroad, in Queensland Australia, which corroborates the finding that when police use data analytics to focus their patrol and crime interdiction efforts on the key parts of a municipality with the highest rates of criminal activity, what results is a substantial decline in property crime within that municipality. Alongside this promising finding is the less promising one: virtually uninterrupted and unchanged levels of violent crime within the municipality. This finding was corroborated in an Australian academic journal in a paper focusing on the police implementation of data-driven policing in the principality of New South Wales (Chilvers&Weatherburn, 2004). Perhaps surprisingly, this study found that the data-driven strategy was wildly successful. After measuring crime levels over time for four different categories of offenses which were breaking and entering, armed robbery, motor vehicle theft, and sexual assault. For each of these except the category of sexual assault, the number of incidents for that crime declined discernibly over the implementation of the strategy, while sexual assault (the only violent crime that was measured in the study) was unchanged overall.

The Broader Context of Organizational Friction to Change: The role of law enforcement in the United States has changed over time, generally in the direction of accumulating more responsibilities and greater pressures than ever before across multiple spectrums of expectation. Police are expected by governments to be efficient and judicious, by citizens to be diligent and professional, and by the media to be open and transparent. The profession of law enforcement officer is an amalgamation of many professions, as an officer of the

law might be expected to contain the qualities of a teacher, social worker, lawyer, wrestler, marksman, public speaker, mediator, paramedic, crossing guard, and intelligence agent - each in different measure. Because of the expectations and pressures unique to law enforcement, police can be resistant to organizational change and highly skeptical of change that represents new regulatory burdens on their behavior or restrictions on their discretion. Attempts at organizational change from outside of the agency can be treated with resentment or even resistance, and attempts at change from within the agency risk ostracism on the part of the change agent. This makes policing reform a delicate matter best handled by individual leaders who understand the unique environment and nuances of this type of bureaucracy. Police organizations are largely homogeneous in nature, filled with young to middle age men, most often white, and most often with a high school education or some college. Institutional inertia is significant, meaning that organizational change is slow to take place if it happens at all, and sweeping reforms are looked upon with rigorous dubiousness - especially reforms that increase oversight or external scrutiny on the police agency (Schaefer, 1998).

There are three primary types of organizational change in police departments. The first is changing the composition and competencies of officers themselves through training or through modified selection and promotion processes. The second is the creation of specialized subsets of police agents such as specialists in organized crime, drugs, or sex crimes. The third type of change is that which is intended to alter the "internal climate" of the agency by improving morale, participation, or professionalism (Greene, 1981, p. 80). In practice the criminal justice leadership literature explores the first and third of these categories with more breadth and rigor. Each of these three classifications of change have their own barriers. The primary barriers to increased training requirements or more scrutinizing selection and promotion processes include salary limitations on police agencies, which are government entities that do not produce a profit. Additional training requires time commitment that distracts police from field work, and can be met with resentment if the training requirements are perceived to be too onerous or too unconnected to the actual training needs that the officers themselves perceive are needed. The primary barriers to the development of specialized subsections of police officers include the side effect of reducing the number of generalists within the department, and might lead to blind spots among the specialists for work that is not directly related to their specialty. The barriers to intended shifts in the internal climate or morale of the police agency include resistance to positive and negative reinforcement, and a perception that oversight will be done by individuals or committees that are not sufficiently in tune with the challenges that law enforcement officers face.

The social scientist Herbert Simon, who published widely on research related to organizational decision making and problem solving, theorized that individuals who serve time within an organization begin to adopt organizational ideologies and to think as a unit in some respects (Simon, 1965). In some organizations this moderation of individual thought can have the effect of pacifying individual moral or ethical concerns so long as the ethical lapse or other misconduct is committed by another person within the organization (Umphress, Mitchell, & Bingham, 2010). This active or passive loyalty to other individuals within the organization tends to grow over time and is not so much a form of indoctrination as a form of mutual loyalty reinforcement and reciprocity. In a nutshell: the deference and latitude you allow for other police officers is the same deference and latitude they grant to you in your own actions as a police officer. Even to those officers who perceive their own conduct as pristine, the knowledge that some potential future faulty decision will be treated forgivingly, is likely a balm to allay the stresses of the profession and the corresponding fears of being accused of misconduct (DuCharme, 2002, p. 2531).

Analysis: Despite the mixed reviews of data-driven policing strategies, it is possible to delineate between the positive and negative aspects of this organizational change, and how leaders can manage this change in a more satisfactory manner if they implement this practice (Ferguson, 2017). It is clear from the literature that the first and perhaps most frequent barrier to successful implementation is the internal constituency, the agency itself. Without very intentional, frequent, and intense communication and training the police within the agency will revert back to traditional patrol routines instead of implementing this strategy, or they will dismiss the concept as just one among a sequence of fad ideas that spike in popularity temporarily and fade away in the long run. Leaders in police agencies or public office must take into account the high failure rate of reformist change within law enforcement and act accordingly. Additionally, the external constituency of the community within the police jurisdiction may also offer friction against the change for the following reasons: (1) the shift in law enforcement resources away from or into their communities, (2) the perception and reality of slower response time to emergency calls that take place outside the high crime areas, and (3) the backlash effect within the community that comes from any increase in arrests, adjudications, and prosecutions. Leaders of these change initiatives must take these into account as well, and be prepared to counter objections in a diplomatic and responsible manner.

That said, it is important to acknowledge that there is a highly persuasive reason for the widespread adoption of data-driven policing, and that is the modest success that it has achieved in the reduction of nonviolent crime. This success has been replicable, studied in multiple different ways, and thoroughly corroborated. Any effective communication or persuasion strategy in regard to this change initiative should include a solid defense of this success, while simultaneously acknowledging that it does not seem to substantially reduce violent crime and that it may cause some concerns within the jurisdiction about disparate scrutiny, as studies have shown that data-driven policing often means re-allocating police resources to parts of municipalities with low incomes, minority populations, and histories of bad relationships and broken trust with law enforcement. Finally, one of the most complex challenges of this change initiative is that it substantially changes the organizational culture from one of a more relaxed and professional feeling atmosphere, toward one of high stress due to the higher accountability. Police officers and their commanding sergeants have reported that within data-driven policing regimes, there is less latitude to choose how to respond to crime, and the policing becomes more hard-nosed at the expense of potentially valuable community relationships (Freeman, 2011). Where in the older community policing regime where police intentionally developed trust within the communities they patrolled, this new model penalizes officers for spending time on that diplomatic mission, and relegates it to an ancillary or even nonexistent part of the career (Magers, 2004). While there is a growing body of scholarship on how to strike a balance between data-driven policing and community policing, that scholarship is in its infancy, and still admits that there is a strong tension between the two strategies (Willis, 2011). While the two strategies may be forced to reconcile, they will likely never be in a symbiotic relationship.

CONCLUSION

The principles behind data-driven policing are a predictable 21st century formulation, uniting the efficiency of mathematics with the inefficiency of routine police patrol and criminal interdiction. The strategic method of using large data sets to focus areas of responsibility and promote accountability is a concept imported to the public sector from the private and corporate sector, which can cause equally predictable friction. While members of the public within our communities may agitate for efficient use of tax dollars, rigorous adherence to policies, and measurable results for public agencies – they seem to shy away from such demands if it results in a level of scrutiny or accountability that affects them in their everyday lives. A similar phenomenon happens within organizations, where employees agitate for a streamlined system but when one is implemented they begin to yearn for the older less formal system that made them feel less like a cog in a machine. Data analytics does to a certain extent make professionals slaves to numbers, and it is infecting many

professions simultaneously from teachers who feel they must teach to the content of standardized exams, to fast food clerks who are expected to turn around orders within thirty seconds or see their bonus disappear at the end of the month. The prior world of a more relaxed approach has been replaced by the new world of rigorous work productivity. In the public sector, and particularly the criminal justice subsection of the public sector – which has been accused of bloat and waste - there is a tendency to jump (perhaps too eagerly) at these data driven strategies to prove the worth of the profession to the community with metrics. The drawback of that eagerness is that large, sometimes sprawling agencies, attempt to change their own culture wholesale as if doing so can be accomplished on a whim and without significant friction, backlash, or even failure. Leadership analysts such as Ken Blanchard (2019) insist that communication is the central tool in the change agent's toolkit, and must be used pervasively, frequently, intentionally, thoughtfully, and with detail instead of vagueness. The body of research literature that has been assembled on the topic of implementing data driven policing seems to corroborate that advice, by showing us that the municipalities most successful at implementing the change were those that intentionally confronted the difference in police culture between police agencies that use data-driven policing, and those that use the more traditional community policing.

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