

## R.I.P. COMMUNITY POLICING?

*Reclaiming professionalism sounds great, but it begs an underlying issue*



By *Julius (Jay) Wachtel*. Having suffered for years through the mind-numbing rhetoric of community policing, your blogger was thrilled to attend the panel entitled “[A New Professionalism](#)” at the June 2010 conference of the National Institute of Justice.

Sparks flew from the very start when [Christopher Stone](#), Guggenheim Professor of the Practice of Criminal Justice at Harvard’s Kennedy School took on – hold your breath – *community policing*. Placing himself firmly in the ranks of the contrarians, he criticized its “cacophony” of purpose, airing out what many have whispered for years, that by absorbing every promising strategy that comes along, with even the most focused crime-fighting programs labeled as inspired by its principles, the concept has been blurred beyond recognition.

As it turns out Dr. Stone wasn’t there just to slay *one* dragon. A monograph soon to be released by [Harvard’s Executive Session on Policing](#) intends to rehabilitate – hold on to your fedoras – *police professionalism*. Dr. Stone and his colleagues will argue that their version, snappily entitled “the new professionalism,” does *not* portend a rebirth of the much-maligned model that dominated American law enforcement in the decades preceding community policing. (To complicate matters some insist that the recent explosion in aggressive strategies such as stop and frisk signals a reincarnation of the “bad” professionalism, but never mind.)

There are at least four aspects to the new, improved version (keep in mind that Harvard's report isn't out, so this is based on what your blogger scratched out the old-fashioned way):

- A “new accountability” that goes beyond talking about integrity to creating systems that support it; for example, using databases to track officer behavior and warn of emerging problems.
- A “new public legitimacy” that integrates the professional model's law-centered response with community policing's emphasis on citizen participation and consent.
- An emphasis on fostering organizations that “transcend parochialism” and can learn, adapt and innovate as circumstances change.
- A “national coherence” that creates common ground among America's hyper-fragmented police system.

But wait a minute: wasn't the community concept supposed to be a Swiss Army knife? Didn't it take care of every important concern? Not according to Dr. Stone. Even its central tenet – that citizens must help shape the police response – has supposedly fallen short. Exactly what “communities” are supposed to do is vague. What's more, the strategy is silent in areas rife with liberty concerns. How should police deal with political dissent? When should they apply aggressive methods like stop and frisk? How should they employ those new, enticing technologies?

Not so fast, said [David Sklansky](#), Professor of Law and Chair of the Berkeley Center for Criminal Justice. (Full disclosure: David was an Assistant U.S. Attorney while I supervised an ATF squad in Los Angeles. That he didn't always prosecute when we wished will have no influence on this essay.) While Prof. Sklansky agreed that community policing has definitional issues, one being that communities don't agree within themselves as to what's needed, he argued that it nonetheless focuses much-needed attention to the tendency to under-engage with citizens and over-rely on technology. Voicing skepticism about recent innovations such as “information-led” and “predictive” policing, he worried that their preoccupation with numbers harkens back to the same old bureaucratic tendencies that veered professionalism off course. Instead of doing away with community policing he suggested developing an “advanced” version, and we trust that its precepts will be addressed in the forthcoming paper.

Professors Stone and Sklansky were followed by Chief Ronald Davis, East Palo Alto, California. His views reflected the concerns of someone who's involved in the

practical side of things, securing resources and making things happen so that others have something to pontificate about. Although Chief Davis supports improvements, he warned that any departure from the status quo could confuse politicians and grantors. With [COPS](#) disbursing millions each year that's not an idle concern.

Chief Davis also offered a provocative question. Is policing a profession or a vocation? If it's a profession its rules, practices and techniques should make the national coherence that Dr. Stone finds lacking a non-issue. Yet profound socioeconomic, cultural and political differences between communities, even those located within the same political boundaries, assure that policing will remain far from "coherent" for the foreseeable future.

In his seminal volume, "[Varieties of Police Behavior](#)," [James Q. Wilson](#) argued that the centrality of discretion defines police work as a craft. Unlike a true profession, policing doesn't lend itself to standardized procedures or written directives. It's mostly learned through apprenticeship, as even the best academies can't simulate the infinite variety of situations and personalities that officers encounter each day. Policing's deeply individualized and particularized nature makes its study exceptionally challenging. And we haven't even touched on how police interact within their own ranks, nor with outsiders.

To understand why cops and chiefs behave as they do we must understand the forces that shape their environment. In past years that was done ethnographically (think Wilson, Manning, Van Maanen and Muir.) Lacking contemporary research of such depth it seems wise to take another look at how the sausage gets made. There are many interesting questions. Crime has supposedly receded, so why have things taken such an aggressive turn? In an [earlier post](#) we mentioned the veteran Camden PD captain who was browbeaten during a Compstat meeting because one of his teams made only a single arrest in four days. Whether that one pinch was particularly difficult or noteworthy seemed to be of little interest, which considering the [pressures generated by Compstat](#) isn't particularly surprising.

That's not to say that constructs such as community policing or police professionalism or the new versions of each have no value. Yet developing a framework that can advance policing to the next level requires far more than from what this (admittedly astigmatic) vantage point looks like a mishmash of ideology, assumptions and superficial observation. So, having discouraged jumping to prescriptions it now seems only fair to make one. Before revising any more paradigms, let's do the grunt work. If we need a template, "[Varieties of Police Behavior](#)" seems an excellent choice. Dr. Wilson sent graduate students to eight communities; with money from COPS we could dispatch them to eighty, and do it regularly. Imagine that: a national survey! Interviewing a cross-section of cops,

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politicians and citizens couldn't help but enlighten us about how policing gets done and, most importantly, *why*.

First *describe*; then and only then *prescribe*. Isn't that what we insist our students do?