

OUTSIDE THE ACADEMY: LEARNING COMMUNITY POLICING THROUGH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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Introduction

Recent events highlight the need for many law enforcement agencies to focus on transparency, re-establish legitimacy, and continue to improve strained community relations. Community policing, long lauded as a potential solution to improve community-police relations, may be an important component. The Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) conceptually defines community policing as a “philosophy that promotes organizational strategies that support the systematic use of partnerships and problem-solving techniques to proactively address the immediate conditions that give rise to public safety issues such as crime, social disorder, and fear of crime.” (COPS, 2014). The organizational components of community policing include: (1) agency management, (2) organizational structure, (3) personnel, and (4) information systems. Together, these components are envisioned as aligning to support community partnerships, proactive problem solving, and better relationships between the community and the police.

Despite the conceptual definition, confusion over the practical meaning of community policing has long impacted implementation (Zhao, Lovrich, & Thurman, 1999). Departments identify themselves as engaged in community policing when implementing activities such as foot patrol, opening neighborhood offices, soliciting community feedback, and reporting efforts to the community (Skogan, 2006). Similarly, other specific projects, programs, and tactics such as agency-community plans, bicycle patrol, geographic assignment, citizen input and feedback, and community outreach have, at times, been classified as community policing (see e.g., Hickman & Reaves, 2001).

However, community policing is better understood as an organizational strategy emphasizing citizen involvement, problem solving, and decentralization (Skogan, 2006). While each of the four components forming the conceptual definition of community policing (i.e., agency management, organizational structure, personnel, and information systems) play important roles related to citizen involvement, problem solving, and decentralization, the personnel component resides at the core.

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Ideas in American Policing presents commentary and insight from leading criminologists on issues of interest to scholars, practitioners, and policy makers. The papers published in this series are from the Police Foundation lecture series of the same name. Points of view in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Police Foundation. The full series is available online at www.PoliceFoundation.org.

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Line officers, wielding high levels of discretion, interact with a variety of people in different situations. In these encounters, officers determine how to respond, weighing conflicting concerns against various approaches to find the one they believe is best suited to produce the desired outcome (Willis, 2013). These interactions may be the key medium through which citizens engage with law enforcement; thus, individual officers serve as the fundamental intermediaries of community policing.

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Their interactions with citizens may present the primary opportunities for many citizens to be or become involved in identifying and solving problems, as well as key opportunities for departments to develop trust, respect, and legitimacy. As such, individual officers’ understanding of, belief in, and capacity to engage in community policing represents a fundamental concern in community policing implementation. This is particularly important given the confusion and resistance that can be associated with community policing within institutionalized policing.

Community Policing Training

The importance of individual personnel in implementing community policing underscores the need for effective training. The COPS Office notes that “until community policing is institutionalized in the organization, training in its fundamental principles will need to take place regularly” (2014, p.10). Training that supports community policing is necessary at all levels (i.e., academy, field, and in-service), yet academy training on community policing is unique. First, academy training involves officers who are new to the agency and often to the profession. Thus, academy training on community policing occurs among individuals that may not have entrenched beliefs about the profession or community policing. Second, academy training represents the only training on community policing that happens without the trainees necessarily having exposure to or experience with the actual work environment.

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Despite training being among the most important activities of police organizations, little is known about what types of training are effective (Skogan & Frydl, 2004). This may be true regarding community policing training for recruits. Although academy curriculums may teach the concepts of community policing, questions abound concerning whether community policing can be effectively learned this way. Particularly important is whether community policing concepts can be learned outside a community environment. Thus, the question arises, would recruits better learn community policing through formative experiences within the communities they will later serve?

Police Academies and Learning Community Policing

New recruits typically receive their fundamental policing training from police academies. While structure and organization varies, training within academies across the U.S. is largely homogenous, and training primarily focuses on four key topics: (1) operations, (2) tactics (including firearms, self-defense, and use of force), (3) self-improvement, and (4) law. Typically, operations training receives the greatest amount of attention, followed by tactics, with other topics receiving considerably less. Recruits receive an average of 213 instructional hours in operations, 168 in tactics, 89 in self-improvement, and 86 hours in law (Reaves, 2016). This approach to curriculum is generally effective at teaching key safety-related issues vesting recruits with the knowledge and skills necessary to protect the public from harm and themselves from injury (Marion, 1998).

Nearly all academies provide recruits with basic training in community policing, with recruits receiving approximately 40 hours of instructional time on the topic (Reaves, 2016). However, academy training in community policing may be ineffective. Examples indicate that even when training in the academy has a positive impact on recruits’ attitudes

toward community policing, these impacts dissipate over time, often as early as field training when they are exposed to the actual work environment (Haarr, 2001) and to field training officers who provide them with “street” training. Thus, the lessons learned during field training sometimes do not align with the academy education (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010). Additionally, training on related topics, such as diversity training aimed at developing better racial attitudes among recruits, has been shown to be unsuccessful (Schollosser, 2013). This issue is perplexing given that community orientation, including support for giving citizens a voice, granting dignity and respect, and demonstrating neutrality, can be learned (Skogan, Van Craen & Hennessy, 2015).

Unintentional impacts of the academy experience may also explain why community policing training in the academy is ineffective. Recruits’ perspectives shift throughout their training, and their values are believed to move toward those held by more experienced officers (Mastrofski & Ritti, 1996). This may form the root of policing culture which drives the behavior of individual officers as well as organizations (Bennett, 1984; Solar, 2016). While academy training does not impact recruits’ level of integrity (Blumberg, Giromini, & Jacobson, 2016), academy training may negatively impact recruits’ attitudes toward important issues related to community policing. Thus, there are several reasons why academy training on community policing may be ineffective.

Why Community Engagement during the Academy Might Be Beneficial

Critics assert that training recruits in community policing requires a different approach. Some argue that police academies should focus on the skills necessary to support community orientation (Bradford & Pynes, 1999). This type of training focuses on recruits’ problem-solving, critical thinking, and interpersonal skills as well as knowledge about discretionary decisions and cultural differences that are critical to effective community interaction.

Beyond the curricular aspects of training, other challenges limit the extent to which recruits understand key issues. There is disparity between the way recruits learn in the academy and the way they learn in the field, and limitations of lecture-based training on community policing in the academy might explain why recruits fail to identify with the material when it is taught this way (Hundersmarck, 2009).

Recruits learn through social interaction, so reconstructing knowledge or skills in social environments is essential in developing understanding (Helsop, 2011). Further, outside of interactive environments, recruits disengage from material, reducing absorption, vigor, and dedication (Kaiseler, Passos, Quierós, & Sousa, 2014). Thus, recruits who grasp both the meaning of and context for community-oriented policing are more likely to implement it (Palmiotto, Birzer, & Unnithan, 2000).

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Likewise, when citizens interact with the training process, a positive effect on police-community relations has been demonstrated. Interactions through citizen police academies increase citizens’ understanding and generate positive views of police (Lee, 2016; Schafer & Bonello, 2001). Even citizens who are anti-police change their attitudes as they learn more about the department, its methods, and its purposes (Cohen, 1996). However, while citizens’ exposure to police academies has been demonstrated to be beneficial, little attention has been paid to the value of exposing recruits to the community. Given that interactions between citizens and police that focus on community issues enhance relationships (Graziano, Rosenbaum, & Schuck, 2014), there is reason to assume that citizen-recruit interaction might enhance relations while providing context for key aspects of community policing training, thereby reinforcing the curriculum.

Community Engaged Training at the New Haven Police Academy

To enhance community policing training in the academy, the New Haven Police Department (NHPD) implemented a community-engaged training requirement as a component of academy training. In addition to regular academy training, recruits were required to complete community service and undertake a community project in the city while attending the academy. This novel approach was designed

to reinforce the academy education on community policing by exposing recruits to the neighborhoods and residents served by the department while they learned about topics such as diversity, transparency, and legitimacy. The ultimate goal of the training was to increase community orientation among recruits and further establish community policing as a fundamental character of the department. During the pilot run, to develop evidence to guide later efforts, the academy engaged researchers to evaluate implementation of the community-engaged training.

Data on experiences with and perceptions of the program were collected through interviews with the recruits. Interview participation was voluntary, but all 29 recruits agreed to be interviewed. The recruit serving as class leader organized the interview schedule, and interviews occurred at the training academy in break areas and empty classrooms either before or after the training day. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, and they ranged in length from 13.5 minutes to 54.6 minutes, with an average of 32.5 minutes.

The interviews were semi-structured and involved questions assessing recruits' experiences in the academy and the community-engaged training, attitudes toward entering their policing careers, and their understanding of community policing. Although no direct questions about recruits' attitudes toward community policing or the community-engaged training were asked, review of their responses about specific experiences and expectations allowed assessment/analysis of their perceptions.

Community-Engaged Training

The community-engaged training plan involved assigning recruits to different NHPD district managers within the city. NHPD appoints a district manager to each district within the city with the assistance of the alderpersons from the neighborhoods within each district. Thereafter, these district managers become primarily responsible for managing policing operations within their district. As a part of the community engagement training, district managers were responsible for introducing their recruits to the neighborhoods within their districts and facilitating community engagement experiences. While the protocol required 40 hours of community engagement per recruit, the interviews were conducted approximately six weeks before the academy class was scheduled to graduate.

Therefore, many recruits had not yet completed their full 40 hours. Most recruits ranged between 20 and 30 hours of completed community service. One recruit had not yet started. Other recruits exceeded the required number of hours, with one recruit reporting 60 hours.

Recruits engaged in a variety of activities within their assigned communities. Attending community meetings, the most common experience, was viewed by recruits as largely beneficial to understanding the community. Recruits reported that seeing residents working through issues together was particularly insightful. One recruit noted, "Being in the community meeting, it was more in front of my eyes. I saw what was happening myself rather than just hearsay." Indeed, others considered the experience enlightening as well.

"We went to a community meeting with the district manager and members of the community came in and voiced their opinions. It was good to see how the community interacts with each other and with the police. . . It was actually really eye opening."

Many recruits also volunteered to serve food at shelters or community events. The informal nature of the experiences interacting with the community helped some recruits overcome their initial reluctance.



A NHPD recruit talks with a community member at a local soup kitchen. Volunteering at soup kitchens was a common community-engaged training experience for many recruits.

“So the first day, we’re like oh, we’re just gonna do this to get our community service hours. But then the second week, this is pretty cool. Even though we’re just serving food, we got to meet different types of people. Different people that their income wasn’t there. . . You talk about your life and how the academy is going, and they’ll tell you about their lives and what’s going on with them.”

Indeed, some individuals valued these experiences for the personal element of the interactions that occurred while volunteering which provided perspective on the neighborhoods.

“I personally liked stuff like that, just being able to help people and not just becoming a police officer to walk the streets and stop crime. Just more or less being able to hand somebody a burger, cook on the grill, and see people enjoying themselves in the neighborhood.”

Many of the community engagement activities involved interacting with juveniles. Recruits attended high school basketball games or played sports with kids at the YMCA and local parks. One recruit recalled the impromptu nature of the experience, “We would just interact with the kids, play basketball or baseball.” Others volunteered to work with kids during afterschool activities, including reading and chess programs at schools and libraries. Some of these experiences were transformational.

“There’s probably a 50/50 split. Some of the kids are really receptive to us. . . The kids that weren’t receptive to us, one day we walked in and one of the kids said, ‘Are you here to arrest me?’ You know, he is six years old, and that’s what he thinks when he sees the police. We left that day after reading to the class, and he actually gave us a hug as we left. It was great.”

Other recruits engaged juveniles as part of ongoing outreach activities within NHPD. Again, these experiences reinforced the need to form relationships outside of an enforcement context.

“We had kids in the neighborhood come to the substation, and we had pizza over there. I was teaching art lessons to them. . . The kids were a little apprehensive, even without us being in uniform, just knowing that we were related to the PD, but they were real quick to open up to us once they realized we were just trying to do a fun project.”



NHPD recruits assisted children while trick-or-treating. Neighborhood-based events allowed recruits the opportunity to interact with community members in less formal environments.

Many recruits even came up with their own ideas to engage the community through positive outreach. They wanted to spread the message that they were there to help while providing useful information to residents about issues in the neighborhood.

“We went out and handed out flyers... summer safety for the warmer weather and illegal dumping. I made up a pamphlet with a number that you can call in case you see illegal dumping. You can call, and they’ll come and get it, or, if you have bulk trash, instead of throwing it in the street they can come pick it up.”

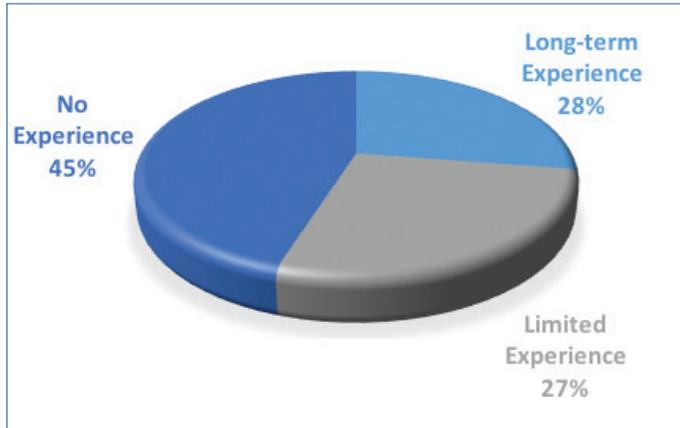
Other recruits were even more ambitious. One group of recruits even tried to develop a program to help a group of homeless residents in the neighborhood. Though their pilot project was ultimately unsuccessful, the recruits were positive about their attempts.

“We were trying to get a program put together for the families that lived in the hotels and motels in [district omitted] . . . to get them outside and let them do an activity to teach them about healthy living like how they can still have a healthy meal even in a hotel room, but no one signed up for it.”

Throughout the interviews, recruits demonstrated key issues concerning why community engagement during training might be important. Particularly salient was the limited experience recruits often had with the city. While eight recruits were long term residents or had previously spent

substantial time in New Haven, eight others had only limited experience with the city (e.g., individuals who had worked in the city but lived elsewhere or attended school nearby). Thirteen others had no experience with the city whatsoever.

Figure 1. Cadets' Prior Familiarity with New Haven



One recruit noted a specific lack of familiarity with the city, "I'm not from New Haven, so I really didn't know much about New Haven. I had to use MapQuest to get here every day. You know, I even took the same route."

The limited experience left many recruits forced to understand New Haven through stereotypes. While some recruits who previously resided elsewhere acknowledge that they had often heard "just don't go to New Haven," others expressed more detail.

"All you hear about New Haven, even living close by, is that there are all these bad areas and you never really look past that. Before I would never know that there are nice areas in the city where people go and live, and it's an area where people want to live."

Indeed, recruits seemingly acknowledged that their initial perceptions about communities were generated through the eyes of others, which was less valuable than generating their own opinions through experience.

"You hear stories. You hear other instructors come in and tell you stuff, and you're like holy crap. You know it's no joke out there. But when I'm here, I'm at the academy, and I'm at like elementary school. . . It's not like you're really out there experiencing the community."

Despite initial notions, recruits within the community-engaged training had experiences within communities that contrasted with their expectations.

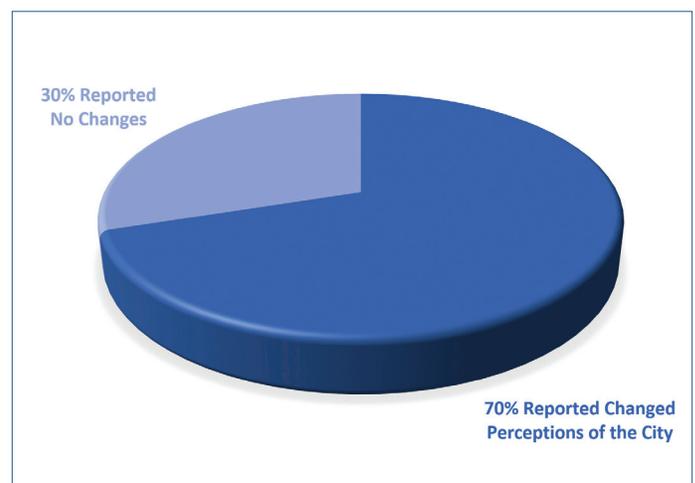
While some recruits indicated that their perceptions of the city and their assigned district had not changed throughout the process, others noted that the time they spent in their districts substantially altered their perception of the neighborhoods. One recruit noted, "But now having been immersed in the community and actually seeing it with my own eyes, you realize it's not all that bad. It's just one person ruining it for the other 99%." Others expressed similar changes in their sentiments about the communities.

"I mean, it seemed different. . . the picture that I had painted in my mind was like, oh, it's a high crime area. So there has got to be crime everywhere. It has got to be a lot of suspicious persons just standing around, but it didn't really seem that way to me. It seemed peaceful; it seemed like the regular. Just people walking around in the streets and going about their business."

The transformational nature of the experience was most common among individuals with less previous experience with the city. Among the 21 recruits that had not previously resided in New Haven, 70% reported that their perceptions of the city had changed as a result of the community-engaged training. Again, this typically related to understanding the community apart from rumors and stereotypes.

"Yes, it has [changed]. . . Because the stories that I was told were, 'Oh, it's bad. It's a bad area.' Now I don't see it as that. I don't. All the community service that I've done and all the little events. . . I mean, every place has bad parts, but New Haven's not bad. I don't see it that way."

Figure 2. Non-Resident Cadets' Changes in Perceptions after Community-engaged Training



Non-resident recruits that reported no change in perceptions about the city typically explained that it was because, with limited experience, they had no pre-conceived notions.

“I had no perception of the district at all when I first started. It was two to three months into the academy when we were assigned to districts. So at that point we learned the different districts. We knew where the districts were, but I didn’t know much about [district omitted] at all. So going into it, I was a blank canvas and I was open to whatever it was.”

Of the eight individuals that had lived in New Haven most of their lives, half indicated that their perceptions of the city had still changed. This reflected limited previous experience in certain neighborhoods among longer term residents.

“I always knew [neighborhood omitted] wasn’t exactly the safest place. It never occurred to me that it could be crimes of opportunity that were taking place and the issues that might lead someone to commit a crime. Now I’m actually familiar with the district a little bit. . . it kinda makes more sense now. It’s not like the area is just full of criminals. It’s just poor decisions and being taken advantage of. Honestly, that’s at least my perception of it.”

Across all backgrounds, perceptual changes related to the community-engaged training extended beyond the neighborhoods themselves and impacted the way recruits viewed community interaction, including criticism from community members.

“Well, now I think it’s a community that’s very receptive to the police. I think especially from the community meeting, they were very even saying, ‘This happened, but I also had this great reaction with this officer this week who really helped me with this.’ They’re not saying, ‘You’re not doing this correctly.’ They’re just saying, ‘Maybe you guys can implement this as well.’ So they’re actually very supportive of the police.”

Some recruits expressed how quickly their sense of the community changed through community engagement. “It’s only been four months, but [I changed through] firsthand interactions, just seeing people.” These experiences resonated with recruits who began to see the value of early community interaction.



NHPD recruits assist with “Toys for Tots”, a program providing Christmas gifts for less fortunate children. Many recruits reported transformational experiences occurred during their interactions with neighborhood kids.

“I think it’s better to start interacting now with people so that when we get out, we already had some type of interaction with them. Especially in New Haven. You deal with a lot of children. We went and read to some of the children and we actually met some of the high school students. They’re going to remember us, and we’re going to remember them. That will help further down the line.”

Several recruits even cited the community engagement as the most influential aspect of their academy experience.

“I’m working with the community. I didn’t expect to do that in the academy. . . Getting the reaction from the community, talking, and the community project that we are doing, not every department might do all this community policing. . . Once you’re getting to know the city better, or the area you’re assigned to, you know before you even get out there that you’re already starting to really build a relationship with the community. . . I don’t see how it could be negative if you’re building good relationships from the start.”

The positive attitude toward the community engagement was linked to better understanding of the community as well as better acceptance of community policing. One

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recruit noted, “I think there is a lot of the academy class that’s gotten behind [community policing] and believes in it. The more we’ve been exposed to the community. . . the class has gotten behind it.”

While the experience was positive for most recruits, the interviews also demonstrated variation in implementation. Although the plan sought to engage all recruits in meaningful community experiences, some recruits received less interaction than others. Moving and retiring district managers meant that the recruits in some districts did not have a community project in their district. For recruits who reported issues, the experience was frustrating.

“Three of us who are assigned to [district omitted] were supposed to have a [community] meeting that one particular night, and we just ran around all over the community trying to figure out what we were doing, where we were going. The time was wrong, the places were wrong, and we finally found it after about an hour and a half of searching. And when we got here, it was kind of like we were thrown in, and it was like nobody really cared.”

Given the positive reaction to the community engagement expressed by the majority of recruits who had more opportunities, recruits who struggled due to implementation issues felt that they missed an essential part of their training.

“I actually would have liked to participate more with the community. It’s kind of aggravating, because you see all of your classmates who are getting to do projects, community service, and getting out into the community. . . It’s really frustrating, we’re up in the air. We have nothing, we’re just tagging on to other peoples’ projects and community service.”

Community-Engaged Training and the Future at the NHPD Academy

Recruits who participated in NHPD’s community-engaged training pilot predominantly reported positive experiences and demonstrated substantial community orientation and overwhelming support for community policing. Particularly important was the tendency for the training to overcome preconceived notions and limited experience. For newcomers to New Haven, this manifested as a better understanding and more positive perceptions of the city

as a whole. For longer-term residents, this manifested in more positive perceptions about neighborhoods that they had limited previous experience in. This may suggest that community-engaged training might address some concerns related to the criticism that officers must come from the community they will police. If recruits can learn to understand and respect communities before they actively police within them, fewer hurdles to forming community-police partnerships will persist.

Based upon the positive results and a commitment to community policing, NHPD has chosen to continue utilizing community-engaged training in their current academy class. Given the implementation issues that affected a small group of recruits in the pilot, NHPD has revised aspects of the program. Instead of assigning recruits to specific districts to perform community service, the academy formed a partnership with a local non-profit, Leadership, Education & Athletics in Partnership (LEAP). The partnership with LEAP allows recruits to have regular contact with kids in the city over the course of their academy training. Involvement with LEAP generates a wide variety of community engagement experiences for the recruits as they work with the organization to participate in community activities alongside the kids serviced by LEAP.

Time will tell whether the formative experiences within the community during training will impact the way in which these recruits engage in community policing as officers. To better understand the impact, NHPD has expressed a commitment to evaluate future cohorts, including evaluating longer term outcomes as officers who experienced community-engaged training at the academy proceed through their careers. In this way, the department hopes to better understand what types of formative experiences best support a belief in community policing among officers as they develop within the field.

Conclusion

The day-to-day implementation of community policing ultimately lies within the hands of individual officers who must both understand and believe in community policing. Given institutionalized impediments, substantial change is necessary for the promise of community policing to be realized. Without officers who believe in community policing as well as officers who understand and respect the communities they engage, it is difficult to imagine how

any activities associated with community policing might effectively enhance community-police relations. Further, without officers who believe in the philosophy of community policing, it is hard to imagine how community policing might itself become an institutional feature of policing.

“Individual officers and their ability to support community policing activities and operations might best determine the future of community policing and community-police relations.”

The strongest force to implement any change in policing may be the individual officers within the field, and community policing efforts designed to improve community relations must acknowledge this fact. Individual officers and their ability to support community policing activities and operations might best determine the future of community policing and community-police relations. Community-engaged training during the academy reflects an understanding of this issue and may represent a way to fundamentally alter officers’ understanding of community policing and the communities they will eventually serve, perhaps fundamentally changing policing in the process.

We would like to thank the following individuals at New Haven Police Department for their assistance throughout the project: Assistant Chief Luiz Casanova, Captain Julie Johnson (retired), Lieutenant Brett Runlett, Sergeant Roy Davis, and Officer Richard Cotto. In addition, we would like to thank Chiefs Anthony Campbell and Dean Esserman (retired) for fostering community policing and encouraging research partnerships. We would also like to thank Officer Kaitlyn Arcamone of the Trumbull Police Department for assisting with photography. Finally, we would like to thank James Willis, Karen Amendola, and Amber Askey for their reviews and feedback on earlier drafts; Jim Burch and Brett Cowell at the Police Foundation for their help and guidance during the publication process; and the Charles Koch Foundation for their generous support of the project.


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