

# What is the Proper and Beneficial Role for a Public Police?

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The San Francisco Supervisor got it right!

“Community policing gets lots of points at the conceptual level, but suffers at the implementation level. We are chronic sufferers of lack of community policing in San Francisco. Everyone talks a good game, but we have nothing policy-wise or practice-wise to prove we are actually doing it. ”

So said Ross Mirkarimi speaking at an August 17, 2009 meeting of the Public Safety Committee of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors.

However accurate Mirkarimi was in his assessment, he got it wrong in terms of exactly who is the proper group to accomplish community policing. Public police are simply not equipped by culture or tradition to “make community policing happen,” as the Supervisor suggested. That’s so for three primary reasons.

First, public police and their organizational culture and language are hierarchical and alienating. To change or reorient an organizational culture that develops over many years takes time and money. If a viable alternative is available, then pursuing community policing by public police will surely waste funds sorely needed for social and educational programs.

Public police are particularly experienced, trained, and skilled in the exercise of persuasive authority to command compliance with their safety orders and needs. They are also trained and effective in the use of tactics such as undercover policing, arrest, use of weaponry to protect themselves and the public as needed, and investigation related to preparing cases for referral to the prosecutor.

On the other hand, public police must be taught ‘how to’ do community policing, a type of policing which requires an entirely different approach and language. It requires a different manner of speaking and a different choice of words from traditional policing. It requires a different mind set and attitude toward the public, and a different kind of leadership from the top down.

Community policing requires officers to stay put in one neighborhood and build long-term relationships with shoppers, residents, businesses, and employees. It requires officers to be much more proactive and friendly than normal, receptive to suggestions, and willing to use a participatory process to set at least some policing goals and priorities. It requires language that is not command-oriented and language that does not tend to escalate emotions or raise hackles of those being questioned and not in trouble, or those causing disturbances. It rarely requires arrest as the first resort. It usually requires conversation, negotiation, and

mediation that moves both parties toward the center, and toward a mutually-satisfactory reduction of tempers and threats.

Second, the present economy will not support community policing. It takes time to accomplish and funds set aside for retraining, two luxuries a cash-strapped economy may well not have. Expenditures designed to retrain traditional police officers how to change their attitudes and behavior seem wasted especially where as Supervisor Mirkarimi noted, there is no political commitment or will to implement the concept of community policing to begin with.

Admittedly, since March in San Francisco there are some amazingly positive results regarding a small pilot project in one of ten police districts, regarding community policing, funded by post 9/11 federal funds. For 28 years I have resided in a neighborhood of this district. Arriving at his new assignment in January, 2008, within three months Captain David Lazar reorganized 125 officers and set up a community policing unit of 9 dedicated officers, each one assigned to a specific neighborhood in the district. I learned the name of an officer specifically assigned to my neighborhood and was amazed to note Captain Lazar's daily email message included in his crime report, encouraging residents to communicate directly with that officer regarding safety questions or concerns.

Another first by Captain Lazar involved my renewed inquiry to him about the current status of an ongoing one-year old investigation of a serious and vicious attack on a beloved neighborhood market owner. Within one week Captain Lazar assigned an officer to answer. Six months earlier I had inquired about the case status via email sent to the prior district captain, and before that in a letter sent to the main San Francisco Police Department investigations unit, but as expected, I had never heard back from either.

Nonetheless, in an economy where 'down less' is the new 'up,' just how secure is funding for Captain Lazar's new approach to community policing? Even more to the point, how likely is it that San Francisco will find funds to expand the pilot program to nine other police districts? How will other major urban areas find funds when the federal government is also in dire economic straights and most post-9/11 funding has not ended?

There well may be better, faster, and thus more cost-effective ways to accomplish the goals of community policing—and that's where the policing model of the San Francisco Patrol Special Police comes in.

The San Francisco Patrol Special Police view their predecessor as the special constables established in 1847 during Barbary Coast Days in San Francisco prior to formation of the public police department in 1850. While the public police stumbled along for years hamstrung by mass resignations and illegal activities, a "special police" continued to serve until the present day, and became a noted force reporting to the command structure of the public police department. Today applicants are vetted by the San Francisco Police Department and officers are regulated by the civilian police commission, yet they have authority to solicit their own private clients and contracts in 'beats' that senior officers own. Over time, a special culture of care for not only their private clientele, but for the entire neighborhoods where they serve, has developed. Today the Patrol Special Police provide enthusiastic merchants, residents, and associations with a different kind of policing, one that they call "neighborhood policing:" [www.sfspecialneighborhoodpolicing.org](http://www.sfspecialneighborhoodpolicing.org)  
<http://www.sfspecialneighborhoodpolicing.org/issues.html>

This is policing that is egalitarian and participatory from the start. The precise type and scope of services provided to private clients who pay a reasonable and competitive hourly rate around \$50 per hour, arises out of the needs and desires of those clients. It is not derived from needs defined by politicians or delivered from the top down by civil servant public police who are not motivated by the private marketplace to provide responsive policing. It is policing that is not as costly as expensive public policing provided at an enormous cost to taxpayers considering employee salaries and pensions paid for years after retirement.

Third, for the public police to let down their defensive stance or devote very many of their scarce resources to community policing, would seem foolish. The increasingly violent nature of crime, audacity of criminals, and development of new forms of crime such as American terrorism, require continuing careful attention to what Professor James Pastor calls 'public safety policing.' Professor Pastor is a noted authority in privatized policing, and discusses the needs of policing in the modern world of crime in his new book, *Terrorism and Public Safety Policing: Implications for the Obama Presidency* (Routledge, August 2009). He makes the important point that private police can be the eyes and ears of the public police and provide routine order maintenance, thus allowing public police to protect the citizenry and the infrastructure from increasingly sophisticated crime having broad impact on major targets including sporting events, national monuments, and business centers.

In addition, citizens are not always in agreement that community policing by public police is wise, if it leads to diversion of policing resources away from law enforcement including arrest and efforts such as undercover work. Patricia Breslin of the San Francisco Hotel Council testified at the Public Safety Meeting on August 17, that while concern for the chronic homeless is a worthy goal for our public police, so too, is enforcement. She asked that the San Francisco Police Department and their new Police Chief Charles Gascon "balance service to chronic abusers with enforcement."

Apparently San Francisco's new Police Chief is in agreement. As lauded in an editorial in the October 5, 2009 *SF Examiner* newspaper, the new Chief targeted the Tenderloin district drug market and the Sunset district marijuana growers for a "crackdown." He utilized undercover stings, raids and anti-crime strikes, and made 302 arrests. Demonstrating an amazing failure to grasp even the basics of true community policing, the apparently clueless editor of the *SF Examiner* called this move a "promising new SF community policing push."

As far as responsible scholars and writers define and describe community policing, none of it involves heavy-handed law enforcement, not to mention how undercover work can prevent crime or elicit input from citizens who can't even tell that police are present in their communities!

Properly understanding, and then evaluating community policing as a concept and for a proper place to lodge its administration and development, and avoiding the repetition of possibly outmoded and "outmodeled" policing concepts as Professor Pastor calls them, seems more imperative today than ever. There's not much time and certainly no spare financial resources that will brook mistaken choices made in policy and practice decisions regarding policing and public safety. Hopefully, wisdom will be increasingly demonstrated by San Francisco's leaders as well as by other cities' leaders, as they address crime problems and public safety needs in the coming months and years ahead. Just as hopefully, policing choices made will keep many in the vanguard of what is not only creative, but logical, effective, and desired by the citizens.

**Ann Grogan** is a California attorney licensed since 1974. She practiced regulatory and employment law for 14 years for the State of California before leaving her last assignment for the Attorney General's Office in San Francisco to open a unique costuming and corsetry boutique in 1990. In 1995 she launched the first website and has become a preeminent authority on her specialty fashion garment. As a retail owner, Grogan was solicited to join in along with other neighborhood merchants in the Castro district who desired additional security to that provided by public police. She agreed to hire a privatized policing force known as the San Francisco Patrol Special Police. Currently she is a residential client of this unique police force in another San Francisco district known as Glen Park. As Grogan discovered through her business experience and research, the Patrol Special Police provide policing of an entirely different nature from public policing, and policing that is far more effective than "community policing." The latter concept was popularized as a vanguard policing trend starting in the early 1970s.

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