



# Defining the “Community” in Community Policing

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By

**Daniel W. Flynn**

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# Introduction

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While the precise definition of community policing has been the matter of considerable debate, the fundamental methodology is simple. The police designate a community in which they will engage in problem solving, develop relationships (that hopefully become partnerships) with the population, collaborate with them to diagnose problems that have some generalized impact, prescribe and implement interventions to solve the problems, and continuously monitor the results. Rather than measuring success in traditional terms (numbers of arrests and citations, stolen property recovered and narcotics seized), the police measure success in terms established in collaboration with those most affected by the problems—the stakeholders.

The size of the communities in which community policing occurs varies significantly across police jurisdictions. In some cases, the relative size of the police jurisdiction may be small enough, and its service population homogenous enough, to consider the entire jurisdiction one community. The more typical jurisdiction, however, is far more eclectic. It is composed of a collage of various areas or neighborhoods comprising assorted socio-economic groups, ethnic groups and groups of particular types of businesses or industries. Thus, for the purposes of community policing, it becomes necessary to subdivide the jurisdiction into several smaller communities to tailor problem-solving efforts to the communities' unique problems. Ideally, successes in each of the smaller communities will combine to create a synergistic effect resulting in jurisdiction-wide crime reductions, enhanced public safety and improved public satisfaction with the police.

Although the size of a police jurisdiction in which community policing is applied and the number of smaller communities within the jurisdiction are important factors, they are not as essential as the individual community. The individual community is the arena in which community policing is performed as well as the participant, recipient and focal point of the community-policing strategy. Thus, police conceptualization of the composition of each community (i.e., the geography and stakeholders within that geography) is a cornerstone of the ultimate success of the entire community-policing effort (Cordner 1998).

This article analyzes aspects of communities in the context of community policing.

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Beginning with an overview of the typical or traditional conception of community, the article explains how variations of the way we conceptualize and define communities can expand the horizons of community policing.

# What is a Community?

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Our notion of what comprises a community is a paradigm that varies to some extent from one individual to the next, based on each individual's background, socialization, education and general perceptions of society. Although we can find the literal definition of community (which involves the characteristics of a group of people who share certain demographic and socio-economic traits and fellowship), our individual perceptions vary widely on the notion of community.

Some think of a community as a residential neighborhood while others envision it as a city, county or region. It is also not uncommon for us to have sentimental feelings about our personal perception of "community." Ethnic, cultural and racial groups often refer to themselves as communities (the Latin American, African American or Asian American community), and groups with common interests consider their commonality a community (the business, academic or law enforcement community). In addition, residents of a geographic area or housing development sometimes consider and refer to themselves as a community, even naming their community, regardless of whether the area is a municipality or other form of political subdivision. Thus, the notion that binds people together as a community lies in their collective perception. A community can be a heuristic and somewhat organic structure—ambiguous to the extent that the ambiguity gives rise to a considerable amount of the debate regarding community policing.

Donald R. Fessler (1976,7) noted that sociologists define community as "any area in which a common culture share common interests." The problem with this broad definition is it applies to anything from "a rural village of a half-hundred families" to "one of our major cities" (Fessler 1976,7). Fessler also noted large cities are not included in sociologists' definition of communities because inherent depersonalization dominates larger cities and militates against the cohesive sense of community.

Beyond the groups that consider themselves communities, there are segments of the population that exhibit characteristics commonly associated with a community. The members of these segments, however, often do not recognize their commonality nor realize they are part of a discernable group. Accordingly, for community policing to be successful, the police must have a firm understanding of community dynamics. With this understanding, police must take a leadership role in organizing homogeneous segments of the population into communities to serve as focal groups for localized community-policing initiatives.

# Police Definition of Community

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While on some levels the possibilities of community composition and definition vary widely, the police must be pragmatic to implement community policing at an operational level.

Police departments tend to define communities within jurisdictional, district or precinct lines, or within the confines of public or private housing developments. As a result, the community, which is the core of the community-policing strategy, is often defined more by police administrative parameters (division of labor and reporting guidelines) than by careful piloting and a thorough assessment of stakeholders. Therefore, the police must delineate communities in a fashion that does not always conform to homogenous community structures to manage personnel, resources and service demand (Manning 1997).

The typical police method of defining communities is functional for community-policing purposes insofar as jurisdictional, district or precinct boundaries are usually derived from a combination of socio-economic, geographic and historical factors that collectively contribute to some level of community composition. Nevertheless, the selected communities tend to be primarily residential, and include small businesses that interact with the residential areas. These communities experience a high percentage of crime and have difficulty with quality of life issues. Since these communities fit into the community-policing model, however, they are likely to benefit from community-policing initiatives.

Although the typical police method has practical advantages, it also has disadvantages, which in some cases inhibit the success of community policing. First, the stakeholders affected by a given problem may not reside within the confines of jurisdictional boundaries or traditional subdivisions of the jurisdiction. Second, groups of stakeholders within a jurisdiction do not fall into tidy residential or business-residential neighborhoods. Therefore, it is possible for the police to overlook other communities and enter into partnerships with incomplete groups of stakeholders.

Another disadvantage to typical police definitions of communities is that the resulting shortcomings may not be readily apparent. It is relatively easy to achieve positive, short-term public satisfaction with community policing, even when community selection has been less than optimal. Most groups respond well to their newly empowered status as stakeholders and the enhanced attention from the police. The interventions that are most likely to have long term positive effects, however, are those that are the result of skillful problem diagnosis and serious valid performance measurement formed in partnership with as many stakeholders as possible in a comprehensive community unit. If the composition of the community has not been correctly assessed due to a restrictive paradigm of the notion of community, all stakeholders will not be identified and involved. Consequently, solutions are likely to be short-lived and superficial.



# Redefining the Community

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It is reasonable that taxpayers generally expect their police department to devote the vast majority of its time and efforts within the boundaries of their jurisdiction. Nonetheless, within their jurisdictional confines, the police generally have flexibility to identify the groups, neighborhoods and areas that function with some commonality. Accurately identifying such groups and considering and treating them as communities, for the purpose of community policing, is important for long-term effectiveness and positive synergy of the larger community.

At first glance, it may seem a simple task to identify individual communities within a jurisdiction. In reality, however, it takes a comprehensive in-depth knowledge of the entire jurisdiction to recognize the communities and subsets of interests. Community structures that are neither typical nor traditional may require resourcefulness, imagination and creativity to identify. Difficult as that challenge may be, it is in that pursuit that we can expand the horizons of community policing by reaching and forming partnerships with previously overlooked segments of the population. These groups have great potential of becoming allies to the police.

One of the crucial issues those concerned with community policing must face is the assumption that there is a community to organize. Some cities and suburbs have developed rapidly and have not formed what sociologists refer to as communities or neighborhoods. Similarly, some precincts or reporting areas may not be contiguous with natural neighborhoods or communities (Alpert and Moore 1993).

We can expand on the applicability of community policing by reexamining the traditional notion of community to include previously overlooked interest groups. If we consider the extent to which traditional communities are autonomous and apply that standard to new groups that have some common interest in a definable segment of geography, we can expand on our paradigm of community and better focus the efficiency and effectiveness of community/problem-solving policing.

Typically, police define traditional communities singularly or by some combination of factors, that include:

- Police organizational designations (beats, sectors, areas, precincts or districts);
- Socio-economically defined neighborhoods (housing developments, or racially or culturally homogeneous neighborhoods);

- Geographically defined areas bounded by natural or man-made barriers;
- Geographically defined areas that are distinctive by their crime rates or numbers of calls for police service;
- Areas represented by self-appointed grassroots organizations; and
- Areas containing particularly vocal or politically active inhabitants (Watson, Stone and Deluca 1998).

While all these factors have some validity and certain pragmatic origins, using any of them exclusively limits the ability of the police to reach the stakeholders in a designated area and the groups of stakeholders in the jurisdiction.

A way to transcend from the traditional notion of community while remaining within police operational parameters is to examine some common denominators of the various interpretations of communities, craft a generic working definition of community and then consider non-traditional applications of that definition.

George A. Hillery, Jr. (1955) attempted to classify 94 different definitions by content to see whether he could identify areas of common agreement. His conclusion was that “[m]ost are in basic agreement that community consists of persons in social interaction with a geographic area and having one or more additional ties” (Hillery 1955:111).

Trojanowicz and Moore (1988,4) noted, “what many researchers have failed to address adequately is that at least three profound changes that have occurred in the United States since World War II have dramatically altered the concept of community. The impact of mass transit, mass communications and mass media have widened the rift between a sense of community based on geography and one on interest.”

The common factors found in the areas police departments use to define communities include:

- **Geography.** Inherent in the fundamental concept of community is people who live and or work together in a given place;
- **Shared Character or Identity.** Groups of people who merely live or work together in the same geographical area do not make a community. They must share some characteristic(s)—ethnicity, age, economics and religion—that cause them to identify with one another; and

- **Common Concerns or Problems.** For groups of people to join together, attain consensus on issues and agree to act in a partnership with the police, the groups must share common concerns or problems.

Groups of people who more or less exhibit each of these three factors can be considered a community, at least for the purposes of community policing.

We can expand our view of community structure, not by adding factors, but by expanding upon the paradigms within which we view each factor. For example, if we generally view the factor of geography in a residential neighborhood context, we could question whether geography could include a large airport, hospital complex, civic center, warehouse complex, a distinct natural habitat or a series of delivery routes. If we generally view shared character or identity in a context of economic status, race, ethnicity or culture, we could analyze whether this shared character or identity includes such diverse groups as seasonal residents, commuters, the aviation community and the motoring public.

The factor of common concerns or problems is perhaps the most flexible of all. We can assess if otherwise unrelated groups have common concerns with an area such as a business and recreational area or a political district, or those concerned with the problems of a region recovering from a natural disaster. With these various definitions of what constitutes a community, there are untapped possibilities that can enhance the potency of community policing.

# Non-Traditional Communities

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Within the realm of problem-oriented policing, many police departments have successfully formed community partnerships with various groups within their jurisdiction, and confronted individual problems of specific concern to those groups. These efforts are solid problem-oriented policing tactics, which are also core elements of community policing. Community policing, however, extends beyond the strategy of treating individual problems by addressing the collective problems of a community. Thus, the non-traditional community is more than a special interest group or a group formed around one issue. The non-traditional community is systemic and consists of a collection or set of groups that share the characteristics of a community. It is not restricted to being residential or residential/business and it need not be located in areas beset with deep-seated chronic high crime rates.

[C]ommunity policing need not be restricted to blighted, inner city neighborhoods. For instance, the Clearwater (Florida) Police Department not only employs community policing in troubled neighborhoods, but also in their new beach patrol. This reflects the fact that the beach “community” made up of shopkeepers, residents and tourists not only inhabit the same geographic location, permanently or temporarily, but that their community of interest lies in their desire to reduce crime and disorder on the beach (Trojanowicz and Moore 1988,10).

In its community-policing initiatives, the Miami-Dade Police Department (MDPD) conducted several experimental projects dealing with non-traditional communities. The MAST, TRAP and the Superbowl projects provide examples of community-policing efforts in non-traditional communities.

# The MAST Project

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The Marine Advisory Support Team (MAST) project's purpose, as summarized in the founding departmental directive, is the following:

[I]n an effort to facilitate community participation in marine related activities, the Marine Patrol Unit has implemented a program that will bring together concerned parties to provide input and identify ways to improve our service to the boating public and related interests. The program to be known as Marine Advisory Support Team(s) (MAST), will convene monthly meetings to discuss mutual concerns and seek marine community participation regarding the Marine Patrol Unit's overall enforcement and assistance objectives (Miami-Dade Police Department 1996,3).

The MDPD defines the area of Biscayne Bay/Intracoastal Waterway, which together run the length of the coastal area of Miami-Dade County, as a community. The stakeholders of the community include representatives of the businesses (marinas, charter boats, water taxis, boat rental businesses, fish and tackle stores, ferry services and cruise ships) that are dependent on the bay. In addition, representatives of public parks and beaches that abut the bay (such as bridge tenders, waterfront homeowners and representatives of federal, state and municipal law enforcement agencies—the U.S. Coast Guard, Florida Marine Patrol and municipal police departments) and have responsibilities on and around the bay are all considered part of the marine community.

With the MAST project, the MDPD formed a partnership with the members of the marine community. In the daily performance of their duties, MDPD Marine Patrol officers interact with members of the community by gathering information about problems and working with them to solve previously identified problems. At least once a month, there is a general open meeting of the marine community wherein participants discuss problems occurring on and around Biscayne Bay. The problems generally include such things as impaired boaters, persistent wake zone violations, unsafe navigational conditions, persistent intrusion of boaters into restricted bathing areas, and information about crimes such as drug smuggling or smuggling of illegal aliens.

The MDPD Marine Patrol officers work with the community on solving as many of the problems as possible. The federal, state and local law enforcement agencies with concurrent jurisdiction on the bay enhance MDPD's efforts. Aside from bringing useful information to the group, these agencies' representatives become aware of problems and apply their resources to join in the problem-solving efforts.

**Figure 1.**

<b>Community Characteristics of the Miami-Dade Police Department MAST Project</b>	
<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>MAST Equivalent</b>
Defined Geographical Area	Biscayne Bay
Shared Character or Identity	Marine Interest
Common Concerns or Problems	Problems affecting commerce, recreation, safety and environment

The MAST project demonstrates that a community need not be primarily residential or residential-business to qualify for a community-policing initiative. Collectively, the members meet each of the criteria for a community (see Figure 1).

Another interesting fact the MAST project brings to light is that the specialized marine patrol unit that administers the project is not a traditional patrol unit. These officers are trained and equipped to deal with problems in a marine environment.

Since its inception, the MAST project has provided an open forum for members of the Miami-Dade County to address problems and concerns. When there have been boating accidents, MAST members have examined the contributing conditions and the police have initiated directed enforcement to prevent recurrences. When there have been problems with operators of rented personal water crafts (jet skis, wave runners) entering restricted swimming areas and jeopardizing swimmers, waterfront hotel operators and park managers have worked with the rental companies and police to prevent recurrences. Additionally, when there have been problems of thefts of boat motors and equipment from local marinas and boat mooring areas, information about the thefts has been shared, enabling other members and the police to be on the lookout for the stolen equipment and suspects.

Performance measures for the MAST project include the numbers of boating accidents, drownings and successful rescues; response times to rescues; crime rates; and numbers of complaints of boating related incidents. More intangible measures include team-working spirit and satisfaction of the marine community with the service the MDPD Marine Patrol Unit provides.

Collectively, the MAST program has formed functional partnerships between the police

and community, and it has led to collaborative problem solving. It also demonstrates the potential of expanding the applicability of community policing to serve non-traditional communities.

# The TRAP Project

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Another example of community policing in a non-traditional community lies in the Miami-Dade Police Department’s Tourist Robbery Abatement Project (TRAP). The department initiated this project in 1992 when there was a growing trend of several sensational violent crimes against tourists. There was a pattern of tourists being robbed in an area that was not a usual tourist destination. To address the situation, the MDPD initiated a number of traditional investigative and proactive law enforcement techniques (surveillance, decoy operations and investigative task forces) to abate the problem. Each technique yielded monthly crime reductions in the 20 to 30 percent range. The crimes, however, were seriously impacting not only the victims, but the vital tourist industry in the county. Hence, it was necessary for the department to create more effective strategies.

MDPD commanders responsible for the area in which a high percentage of the tourist crimes were occurring reevaluated the situation. They sought solutions outside the realm of the standard investigative and enforcement techniques. As a result, they decided to view the local tourist industry, including transient tourists, as a community (see Figure 2). On that premise, they formed the TRAP Project.

**Figure 2.**

<b>Community Characteristics of the TRAP Project</b>	
<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>TRAP Equivalent</b>
Defined Geographical Area	Corridor connecting airport and popular local tourist destinations
Shared Character or Identity	Tourist hospitality industry and its customers
Common Concerns or Problems	Victimization of tourists



Under the auspices of the TRAP Project, MDPD officers formed partnerships with local representatives of rental car agencies, hotels, travel agencies, tour services and tourist attractions. Officers surveyed numerous tourists at information booths established in the affected area in cooperation with the local tourism agency. Within a few months, the officers developed a fairly comprehensive profile of the situations and habits that caused tourists to become victims. The County Managers Task Force on Tourist Safety summarizes this profile:

[T]he Tourist Robbery Abatement Project (TRAP) was implemented in March 1993, as a pilot program within our Northside Station Boundaries. A sergeant and four officers were deployed between the hours of 4:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. to assist tourists that may be lost. Visitors contacted are given brochures prepared by the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce as well as directions to their destinations. The program's main objective is to maintain high visibility and to be available to assist visitors who may become lost coming to or from the Airport or other areas. Between March 24 and April 11, 1993, officers made 1,754 contacts with tourists in rental vehicles who had left the main arterial roadways. The reasons given for being lost varied from inadequate signage to lack of directions. Some visitors reported confusion over tolls or not having the necessary change. Others were in search of gas stations to fill their fuel tanks before returning rented vehicles (Miami-Dade County, Florida 1993).

The most salient finding was that tourists leaving the airport area frequently left major highways leading to their intended destination, but became lost in an inner city neighborhood where they were frequently victimized. In this same area, MDPD had previously tried standard law enforcement methods and achieved mediocre results. As part of the TRAP project, the MDPD used a community-policing/problem-solving approach and deployed uniform officers in marked police vehicles to the neighborhood. When the officers would encounter tourists (driving rental cars, seemingly disoriented), they would approach them and ask if they were lost. If they replied in the affirmative, the officers would provide them with a tourist safety pamphlet and lead them back to their destination route. The officers were careful not to denounce or stigmatize the local neighborhood. They merely provided the tourists directions to their destination.

The new approach to the lost-tourist problem resulted in astounding reductions in the numbers of violent crimes against tourists. Whereas the standard law enforcement techniques had resulted in 20 to 30 percent decreases, the problem-solving technique led to 70 to 80 percent decreases (comparing the months prior to any intervention to the early months of the TRAP interventions) in the affected area. As that success continued, the police and the tourist community implemented a series of long term problem-solving responses. Some of the more significant efforts included a series of sunburst symbols attached to highway signs, marked routes to popular tourist areas, staffing a full time Tourist Oriented Police unit to work around the airport providing tourists with safe travel information and directions, and developing public/private victim assistance programs to help assist any remaining victimized tourists. Performance measures for

the TRAP Project include the obvious measures of violent crimes in which the victims are tourists, but also include numbers of lost tourists the officers encountered, numbers of tourists traveling through the affected areas each year and results of surveys conducted by the tourism authorities concerning tourist perceptions of Miami area's safety.

Overall, the TRAP Project, which at the time of this writing has been in operation for six years, has resulted in long-term success. While statistics are available to compare the numbers of violent crimes in which the victims were tourists, success can also be assessed in other performance measures the police and the local tourism community jointly developed. Measurements such as the number of tourists who visit the Miami area each year of the project compare favorably with years immediately prior to the project. In addition, random surveys of tourists indicate there has been a sharp reduction in the tourists' fear of being victimized in Miami.

The TRAP Project provides an interesting example of a non-traditional community. Some of the most important stakeholders (tourists) themselves are transient, and other stakeholders (tourist attractions, service providers and related destinations) are outside the jurisdiction of the police department (MDPD) initiating the community-policing effort. Yet, the problems of the community impact the population of the MDPD jurisdiction on a number of levels. Therefore, there are great benefits to working with stakeholders outside of the traditional realm.

# The Superbowl

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Lastly, the Superbowl provides another example of how departments can use community-policing strategies in non-traditional communities. The Superbowl is the National Football League (NFL) championship game as well as the finale to each football season. It is held in a different locale each year in accordance with the NFL's selection process. Each year the size and number of events associated with the Superbowl have grown to the point that it now takes approximately two years of planning. In addition, one can expect the game to generate approximately 65 million dollars in revenue for the host community.

In the weeks and days preceding each Superbowl there are events such as street parties (which attract in excess of 150,000 patrons), corporate celebrations, a large scale NFL Commissioners' party, players' parties, a large-scale interactive event titled the "NFL Experience" (which attracts over 100,000 visitors) and extensive merchandising operations. Thousands of hotel rooms fill with guests, and local businesses thrive as they serve those guests. Overall, the Superbowl is a continuous series of major special events in the host community.

For the police in a jurisdiction that hosts the Superbowl, the responsibilities and challenges are formidable. Aside from the obvious tasks of managing large crowds, attending to public safety concerns and directing traffic, there are numerous events and issues that impact local communities. Therefore, to properly address all of these concerns while facilitating an important positive event for the region, the police must address the environment surrounding Superbowl-related events (airport, transit systems, hotels and local tourist attractions) and neighborhoods that each Superbowl event venue impacts.

The Miami-Dade Police Department used a community-policing approach to manage the police portions of three Superbowls. Although the department realizes that the Superbowl occurs in a limited time frame, it claims it is beneficial to address the entire series of events as a non-traditional community, given the sheer magnitude of the series of events as well as the numbers of involved stakeholders. The community-policing model enables the department to collaborate with numerous groups that have common interests and solve potential and actual problems early in the process.

While to some extent it may be unorthodox to consider what amounts to a temporary situation (lasting a maximum of two years including planning), a community, examining the way the Superbowl may coincide with the generic definition of community, reveals that it is an effective application of the community-policing model.

**Figure 3.**

<b>Community Characteristics of the Superbowl</b>	
<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Superbowl Equivalent</b>
Defined Geographical Area	Area containing Superbowl event venues, host hotels and connecting transportation corridors.
Shared Character or Identity	Football enthusiasts and others who are involved in the production, service and public safety of Superbowl events.
Common Concerns or Problems	Crowd management, traffic control, and crime prevention.

Approximately eighteen months before the Superbowl, the MDPD begins receiving information concerning planned Superbowl venues, ancillary events, schedules, team accommodations and hotel and transportation arrangements via the local Host Committee (an ad hoc public/private coordinating group) and the NFL. As the planning process continues, the department also seeks contemporary police issues and concerns from the police agency that coordinated the most recent Superbowl.

As the MDPD receives more specific information, they conduct an assessment of the groups of stakeholders the Superbowl events are likely to concern or impact. Stakeholder groups generally include:

- National Football League Management;
- Football Stadium Management;
- Host Committee;
- Host Hotels;
- Airport Management;
- Neighborhoods surrounding the stadium and other major venues;
- Local Transportation System Management (bus, rail and limousine);

- Local Fire Department;
- Other concerned local, state and federal law enforcement agencies; and
- Each major event venue management.

Once this assessment is complete, the department forms a planning and operations committee designed to collaborate with each of the stakeholder groups (Miami-Dade Police Department 1988). As the planning process evolves, supervisors and officers assigned to each component of the committee develop partnerships with members of their stakeholder groups. They confer with them frequently, disseminate information as it becomes available, work with them to identify and anticipate specific problems and problem areas, collaborate on solutions and develop performance measures to evaluate success where possible.

Supervisors and officers of the planning and operations committee meet collectively with increasing frequency as the Superbowl approaches. The supervisor in charge of each component reports on the committee's activities and progress, addresses mutual concerns and compiles plans and operations manuals (Miami-Dade Police Department 1989, 1994, 1998). With input from each component, operational resources are allocated within appropriate budgetary guidelines. When the actual events begin, the police solve the problems on the scene by using the partnerships and information cultivated throughout the planning process.

Performance measures for the Superbowl include the extent to which the police are able to muster all committed resources for each venue, the numbers of accidents and injuries, the satisfaction of event organizers with police service and the ability of the police to provide service within established budgets (Miami-Dade Police Department 1990, 1994).

Using the community-policing approach to planning the operations' public safety component has been highly effective for the Miami-Dade Police Department. Forming partnerships and engaging in problem solving with stakeholder groups have resulted in efficient coordination, effective problem solving and collaborative operations in a large-scale, complex special event.

# Conclusion

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While there are a wide variety of interpretations of what constitutes a community and its size, the police must use a pragmatic interpretation to implement community policing. The police interpretation must conform to parameters within which each police department must function. Such parameters include jurisdictional boundaries, division of labor within the department, service demand and reporting requirements. As a result, over time, the police have solidified a paradigm of community that generally is limited to residential and business/residential neighborhoods.

Shifting the residential and business/residential paradigm to a more generic paradigm of community allows the police to develop new applications of the community-policing strategy. These applications may include using the community-policing strategy in non-traditional communities—communities with shared geography, shared character or identity and common concerns or problems. By recognizing that non-traditional communities need not be primarily residential nor permanent communities, police departments can derive the full benefits of the community-policing strategy in the community structures that make sense for each jurisdiction.

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