

SELECT LANGUAGE | ▼

LOGIN

SUBSCRIBE

JOIN



GAIN A SEAT AT THE CHIEF'S DESK
Advertise with IACP

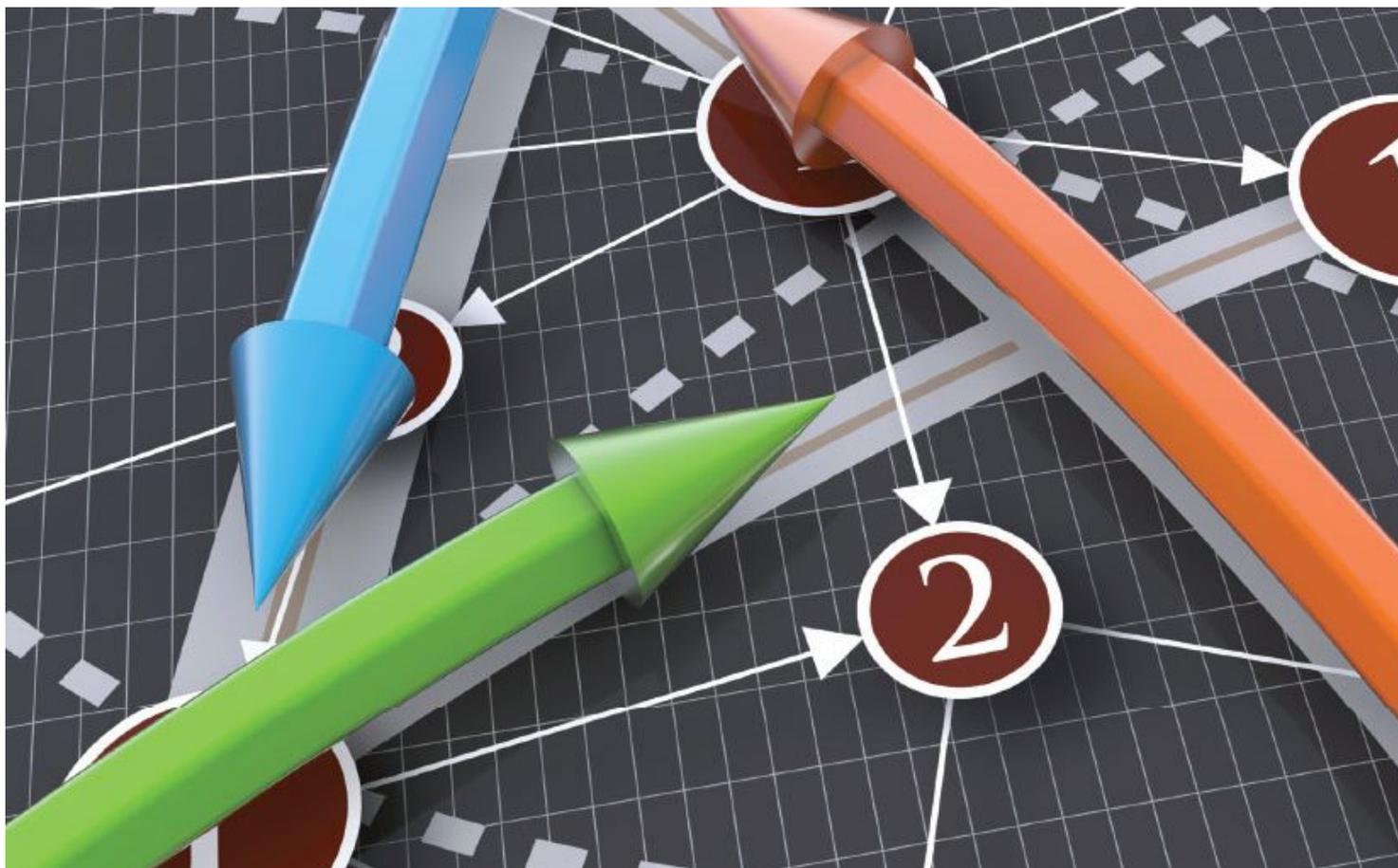


Community Police Relations

[Police Chief Magazine](#) | [Topics](#) | [Community-Police Relations](#) | [Police-Community Planning](#)

Police-Community Planning

Sara E. McClellan, Assistant Professor of Public Policy & Administration, Sacramento State University, California, and Bryon G. Gustafson, Chief (Ret.), Stockton Unified School District Police Department, California



Many police leaders are grappling with new challenges and increased complexity as they work to protect communities, prevent crime, and build trust across demographic lines in an era of economic disparity, social media, and identity politics. Current challenges involve increased scrutiny and expectations related to accountability, priority-setting, transparency, and evidence-based results. Though this struggle is playing out in locales around the globe, the solutions vary. Recent surveys and interviews with police executives, along with prior research to identify common planning challenges and recommendations, suggest that effective crime prevention requires focused and ongoing dialogue about public expectations, public safety priorities, police capacity, and processes for addressing gaps between public expectations and policing outcomes.¹ This solution requires police agencies to both communicate effectively and adopt modest but consistent ways of engaging the public in planning to understand and inform community crime prevention priorities. This need not take the form of comprehensive long-term planning, but does require thoughtfully constructed engagement around the past, present, and future of policing. At a minimum, this means engaging public stakeholders in the following aspects of police planning:

1. interpreting significant public safety trends (past),
2. examining primary policing practices and community safety priorities (present), and
3. understanding and co-constructing alternative policing priorities (future).

Police-community planning is distinct from individual or micro-level relationships commonly associated with the community-oriented policing strategies that became commonplace best practices in the 1990s. Those strategies were grounded in individual relationships and included features like individual officers developing relationships in key neighborhoods or problem-oriented police units or personnel working on specific issues. More recent practices like Coffee with a Cop or executive listening sessions are also interpersonal, micro-level practices. These practices clearly add value that is distinct from the relationship between police departments and the larger community as a whole. The aim of police-community planning is to engage stakeholders in co-constructing and validating community priorities. Specifically, these practices can be used for a range of purposes including implementing broad-based crime prevention, addressing social justice issues, or aligning police resources and actions with systemic problems in traditionally underserved communities.

Over the past 20+ years, numerous practitioners and academics have debated the value of strategic planning. Findings on the impact of planning across industries and organizations are mixed and academic articles and consultant editorials debate the value of top-down versus bottom-up planning and long-range versus tactical planning. Even so, few have explored the work that planning processes do to help police organizations deliver on a broader conception of public value, build legitimacy with diverse stakeholders, and clarify expectations. Viewed from a communicative lens, planning is a form of organizational learning and adjustment by which police agencies strive to act in more intentional ways to address crime issues for which tactical solutions and insular agency actions are insufficient. Effective planning processes do more than guide operational actions. They seek to build legitimacy with key stakeholders, define what constitutes organizational value, and align operational activities and resources with local priorities. One chief described it like this:

We're making sure we're building support along the way and taking time to develop relationships, asking a lot of questions... We asked people in all different settings: what do you want and what matters most? Just asking builds trust and confidence—just treating the public with trust and empathy, being professional and competent. Often, people just want to know their voice has been heard.

This view of planning requires at least some degree of community engagement or collaboration—but not all engagement is equal. In more enhanced models of police-community planning, public stakeholders (e.g., residents, business owners, and faith leaders) take on an active role in working with police agencies to interpret crime data, assess public safety needs, establish priorities, and even hold fellow community members accountable for criminal behavior in a coordinated manner. Well-known and occasionally controversial examples in the United States include the Boston Gun Project in Massachusetts, the Highpoint Drug Market Initiative in North Carolina, and Sacramento's implementation of the Advance Peace program in California.² Research suggests this degree of community engagement is promising, but often unpredictable and resource intensive. In some cases, such initiatives appear to succeed because highly credible leaders or preexisting coalitions serve as champions. Agencies that implement more modest forms of police-community planning often share online information about policing priorities, invite community members to public safety events, and solicit public input via periodic surveys or public forums. Yet, even these types of police-community planning practices appear rare in many regions.

Police-Community Planning in California

A random study of 12 California police agencies suggests that few of the state's city police departments implement ongoing or consistent efforts to engage the public in understanding or establishing police priorities. Internet research revealed that only four of the departments had publicly stated goals or plans. Three of these plans were available on the police department website. Just two police departments indicated clear efforts to engage the public in creating their plan. Table 1 summarizes these findings.

Table 1: Engagement with Public about Police Priorities

City Police Department	Police Plan	On Website	Public Engagement
Barstow	✓ (goals only)	X	X
Burlingame	X	n/a	n/a
S. Lake Tahoe	✓	✓	✓
Bell Gardens	X	n/a	n/a
Covina	X	n/a	n/a
Indio	X	n/a	n/a
Downey	X	n/a	n/a
Palm Springs	X	n/a	n/a
Redondo Beach	✓	✓	X
Oceanside	X	n/a	n/a
San Bernardino	✓	✓	✓
Sacramento	X	n/a	n/a

Following the random study, a targeted study looked specifically at police departments that were actively planning. This second study identified five exemplar police departments lauded for having plans (available on the police website) that featured active community engagement. The five police departments in this second study were Chula Vista, Corona, Morgan Hill, San Francisco, and Ukiah.

Obstacles to Police-Community Planning

Across these studies, surveys and interviews with current and former California police chiefs and former POST directors from western U.S. states highlight a few

common obstacles that may account for this limited evidence of police-community planning. First, all interviewees described the unpredictable nature of law enforcement as frequently at odds with long-term planning. This was captured succinctly by one interviewee: “You can have the best plan in the world and then, when there’s a crisis in the community—the next thing you know... all of the painstaking planning work goes out the window. Now, you’re being guided by the crisis.”² Multiple chiefs expressed concern that municipal officials and members of the public would fail to understand the degree of uncertainty and change associated with managing police agencies:

There have been periods of time where we’ve stepped away and had to revisit goals that are nice and fancy, but not obtainable based on practical constraints like injured officers. We’ve had to have conversations with the city manager and let them know the department won’t meet goals. This creates tension if goals are very public.

This suggests that any police-community planning efforts must seek to promote greater public understanding of the policing context and include sufficiently modest and flexible goals.

Second, all interviewees described how high leadership turnover in police agencies shifts priorities and delays plan implementation.

Chiefs turn over every four or so years—this does not contribute to a long-term plan and follow-through. As an outgoing chief, you may want to leave it up to the next chief to plan, and as an incoming chief, it may take you a year or two to get to a place where you’re ready and have time to plan.

Interviewees raised observations about how an increasing number of retirements limit long-term planning and plan implementation. There was a general consensus that incoming chiefs need several months to a year on the job to assess organizational culture before engaging in any broader planning process. Three interviewees also noted that turnover among municipal officials can shift or stall planning goals for police departments that are dependent on resources allocated through larger municipal processes.

Third, every interviewee expressed frustration with overly cumbersome planning processes captured by this quote: “My horror story is the City of... They took a year

and a half to do focus group community meetings. They were frustrated at the end because what they created was obsolete by the time they created it.” Multiple chiefs who described improved planning processes talked about scaling back after finding that a more comprehensive plan and planning process generated lengthy documents that just sat on shelves. Interviewees reported working with outside planning consultants who were too ambitious and stressed the importance of working with consultants who come from—or truly understand—policing. Multiple interviewees described frustration with external consultants as highlighted in this quote:

There are consulting groups that often fill a niche as planners. Their work products are often highly complex. They have graphs and charts and matrices with statistical models. No one but PhDs understand that. No one is going to use or keep that up.

Multiple interviewees also described the challenge of trying to align or integrate police department plans with larger and more generic municipal plans. They cited unique operational needs, but also expressed concern that they would be viewed as poor team players if they developed their own plans rather than relying on the municipal process.

Finally, several interviewees expressed the concern that police leaders may lack the time or skill to address tensions between public and police priorities. Multiple current and former chiefs described public planning forums as educational opportunities, but noted how much time and skill it can take to bring stakeholders to the table and design a focused discussion or input session. Interviewees also talked about the challenge of navigating changing legislation and public opinion about criminal justice priorities with both internal staff and members of the public. Multiple interviewees cited the legalization of marijuana in California as an opportunity to engage the public around either new enforcement challenges related to marijuana use or the reallocation of resources formerly dedicated to the War on Drugs. Political tensions continue to surround this issue, and some chiefs indicated reluctance to engage in potentially contentious public conversations. Multiple interviewees also raised questions and concerns about how social media platforms like Facebook and Nextdoor are influencing public expectations for police. One interviewee described this growing trend as important but difficult to address in cities with more limited resources:

If we don't engage in this area, social media posts end up carrying the message... You've got cities that are have and have-not cities in terms of staffing levels. These (latter) cities will have more difficulty filling jobs related to communication, planning, and social media.

Interviewees advocated more research on how social media influences public perceptions of policing and public safety priorities.

Police-Community Planning Recommendations

Several recommendations emerged from interviews and surveys with police leaders that are consistent with research on planning and community engagement. These are actionable steps that should prove useful to police leaders looking to engage their community in plans for crime prevention or other policing priorities.

1. Keep planning focused and simple.

Meaningful plans do not need to follow a lengthy and prescriptive process. In some cases, police leaders may engage stakeholders in addressing just a few meaningful questions or objectives rather than conducting a full strategic planning process. While any police-community engagement effort necessarily begins in the here and now, the planning process can begin with a focus on past, present, or future. For example, it could start with an aspirational question such as "What will make our youth in these neighborhoods safer over the next year?" It could also begin with a retrospective consideration of what has transpired over the past year (or years) for a particular neighborhood or stakeholder group. Alternatively, the process could begin with a grounded assessment of what is occurring relative to a specific issue at present. The key is to work with stakeholders to examine these aspects of the police-community experience in a cycle that assesses or evaluates what has transpired, identifies present dynamics, and looks ahead to envision the future. One interviewee explained it this way:

I prefer the more simplistic almost folksy model. We should be able to break it down to really explain what the police department is about and look at the community as

a whole and come up with a basic way to get their input. It's not productive to have raucous meetings where people scream at each other. It's really about where people believe police should be spending their time—or not spending their time. It may be about things people think police are missing or what they should be prioritizing. If it's about the community, you want everyone to be able to understand it. You also want a plan that's simple enough to revamp regularly as needed.

2. Establish clear public engagement expectations.

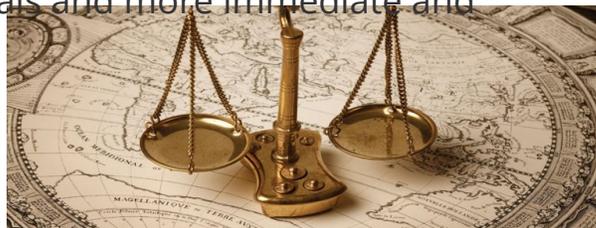
The caution here is to avoid suggesting that everything is on the table. Police leaders should be clear about what they are—and are not—looking for from police-community planning. This planning is not an invitation for the public to run the police department. Instead, police leaders should clearly communicate the boundaries for police-community planning and explain what type of contribution they are inviting from



stakeholders. Are they seeking public input on recent crime trends to inform partnerships with other service providers? Are they hosting a dialogue about how best to police a regular community event? Are they polling the public about competing resource priorities? Notice that none of these targeted questions or engagement methods invite broad evaluation or advice about police operations. Police leaders are not in a position to make sensitive and complex operational decisions in the abstract through community planning and consensus. They are also accountable to existing standards and regulations as well as to municipal leaders or elected councils or boards. Therefore, it is essential for police leaders to outline their expectations and assumptions in advance of public planning interactions—so participants are clear about the purpose and parameters of their involvement before they invest their time and energy.

3. Balance long-term goals with tactical objectives.

Police leaders should pursue both big picture goals and more immediate and obtainable objectives. This approach allows internal and external stakeholders to experience quick wins and identify measurable outcomes while leaders keep their eye on more ambitious possibilities.



New leaders should take their time to engage the community and establish long-term goals while becoming familiar with the internal culture and implementing quick wins. In some cases, this latter work may require leaders to pause progress on a more comprehensive plan to address some immediate pain points or opportunities.

4. Expand plan ownership.

Police agencies will be more likely to implement and sustain plans over time if stakeholders view planning priorities as belonging to a broader team or community rather than to an individual leader. This means steering clear of signature projects or goals. Multiple interviewees talked about how tempting it can be for police leaders to champion and brand a specific initiative as their own. Leaders potentially receive accolades or notoriety for signature projects, but this decreases the incentive for staff and future leaders to own the work. More broadly owned planning content potentially increases stability, inoculates against criticism, and reduces the impacts of police or municipal leadership turnover.

5. Engage people you don't normally work with.

For the broadest acceptance, get critical interests and perspectives to the table. While business owners and faith leaders are often the first to participate, it is important for police leaders to stretch beyond the regular contributors. Stakeholder engagement is a key factor that influences public perceptions of agency value and legitimacy. At the same time, that engagement shapes a police agency's understanding of its stakeholders and, in turn, its operational choices. One interviewee remarked:

As a police chief—you are more than likely going to carve the path of least resistance. You'll probably spend the most time with the groups of people who are most respected in the community. Those people who you're more comfortable with. Oftentimes, those are people more involved with service organizations, faith communities, etc., in your community. You can put together a panel or forum that looks good, but it just reaffirms what exists.

Another interviewee said, "My goal going forward is to identify strategies for engaging others such as our migrant communities. One of our citywide ongoing strategies is inclusiveness." Multiple interviewees noted that building trust required them to seek support in working with individuals and communities they did not always know how best to approach or work with.

6. Determine the internal and external resources you need to plan effectively.

Planning and community engagement activities are similar to crime prevention and recruiting activities: they don't just happen on top of existing work—they are the work. They require resources that might include the chief's time, money, data, staff time, or one or more people with facilitation, project management, data interpretation, or social media skills. All interviewees talked about the time and effort required to effectively plan. Planning research across numerous disciplines also indicates that under-resourcing is a significant barrier to implementing and sustaining effective plans. Therefore, police leaders should adopt a sufficiently narrow focus and clearly assess the types of resources needed to engage the public in a meaningful way and implement priorities successfully.

7. Monitor and communicate trends and progress on a routine basis.

Finally, periodic progress updates and targeted public issue surveys allow police and community members to stay grounded in a shared reality. Police leaders should routinize at least some elements of planning (quarterly, semi-annually, or annually) so that the process drives ongoing interactions and improvement. Publicly accessible updates and routine dialogue also provide openings to address inevitable



changes. If there is a natural disaster, economic downturn or uptick, or a change in leadership or public sentiment, leaders will have pre-established relationships and forums that make it easier to acknowledge important events, assess their impact, and plan for the future. Some agencies also track trends and progress in consistent ways to inform resource allocation. Other

public sector services (e.g., K-12 education or the fire service) apply specific metrics or funding formulas related to population changes and service outcomes to trigger additional funding for staff, facilities, or other operational needs. Police leaders should experiment with tying aspects of plans to population growth so other municipal leaders and members of the public can see how certain factors influence crime and departmental resource needs.

Concluding Concepts

Many public sector organizations have adopted engaged and systemic planning processes in an effort to ensure more equitable or accountable public services over the past three to four decades. In some cases, agency leaders have voluntarily pursued planning processes, and, in other cases, they have adopted planning practices in response to legislative mandates or funding requirements or incentives.

For police leaders, planning processes represent both agenda-setting and capacity-building mechanisms. They also have the potential to increase follow-through and accountability relative to longer-term problem-solving commitments and to increase shared understanding—both inside and outside—of the police department. Chiefs can choose the scope and timeframe that works for their departments and scale based on resources and feedback. 🛡️

Sara E. McClellan is an assistant professor of public policy & administration at Sacramento State University. She has 20 years of public sector

management, training, and consulting experience. She studies and designs innovative stakeholder engagement and communication practices to improve community safety, education, health, and economic outcomes. She earned her PhD in organizational communication at the University of Colorado at Boulder and her master's in public administration from the University of Southern California.

Chief **Bryon G. Gustafson** (Ret.) spent 27 years in law enforcement. He served as chief of Standards, Evaluation, & Research for California POST, chief of police at the Stockton Unified School District Police Department, and most recently as the 50th chief sergeant-at-arms for the California State Assembly. He holds a PhD in public affairs from the University of Colorado Denver. He maintains a small consulting practice and serves as a trainer for state and local government managers.

Notes:

¹ Quotes drawn from interviews with law enforcement executives between January 23, 2019, and February 6, 2019.

² David M. Kennedy et al., *Reducing Gun Violence: The Boston Gun Project's Operation Ceasefire* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, 2001); David Kennedy and Sue-Lin Wong, *The High Point Drug Market Intervention Strategy* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2009); Wesley Lowery and Steven Rich, "In Sacramento, Trying to Stop a Killing Before It Happens," *Washington Post*, November 9, 2018.

Please cite as

Sara E. McClellan and Bryon G. Gustafson, "Police-Community Planning," *Police Chief Online*, October 9, 2019.

Share this article with anyone using the following URL:

<https://www.policechiefmagazine.org/police-community-planning/?ref=680829eed753cc15aab3a1a320ba5878>



The Police Chief is the official publication of the **International Association of Chiefs of Police**.

All contents © 2003–2020 International Association of Chiefs of Police. All Rights Reserved.

Copyright and Trademark Notice | Member and Non-Member Supplied Information
| Links Policy

44 Canal Center Plaza, Suite 200, Alexandria, VA USA 22314 | 703.836.6767 or
1.800.THE IACP

Designed and Built by Matrix Group International, Inc.®