An Examination of Strategic Planning in American Law Enforcement Agencies

A National Study

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Strategic planning in police departments represents a significant departure from a traditionally reactive orientation to one that is more proactive in nature. This study followed an inductive reasoning approach to investigate the implementation of strategic planning in American law enforcement agencies and then develop theoretical models that might capture variation across organizations. Based on the initial results from telephone interviews and selective site visits, we were able to identify two key dimensions that seemed to differentiate the implementation of strategic planning among these law enforcement agencies. As a consequence, four styles of strategic planning emerged. This article discusses the development of strategic planning in U.S. police agencies and implications for the future.

Keywords: strategic planning; police organizations; community-oriented policing; inductive approach; theoretical models

Introduction

Planning is an essential feature of a successful organization (Donaldson, 1995). It is difficult to imagine an organization that can thrive or even survive without carefully
creating and then implementing a long-term plan. Performed deliberatively, strategic planning can achieve three primary objectives (Koteen, 1997). First, organizational goals concerning what an organization wants to achieve can be clearly defined during the planning process. Next, a well-developed plan usually entails the formation of a detailed process (means) for achieving important goals. Finally, in contrast to decision making that occurs on a daily basis in response to immediate challenges, a primary purpose of strategic planning is to set priorities and provide direction for an organization’s future. As a result, employees are able to envision themselves as an important part of a larger organization and better understand where their agency is heading.

Strategic planning became a popular movement in the public sector during the 1980s when governments at federal, state, and local levels were forced to face an increasing demand for services without significant increase in resources (Moore, 1995). In particular, an emphasis on strategic planning followed directly from legislation passed by Congress known as the Government Performance Results Act of 1993. Section 3 of this act stipulated that all federal departments would have a strategic plan in place by September 30, 1997. In addition to the goals and objectives, each plan necessarily included specific measures of goal attainment and evaluation methods. Furthermore, the General Accounting Office (GAO) was designated to assess the overall effectiveness of strategic planning in the federal government.

Strategic planning has become a fixture of many publicly administered organizations including those affiliated with law enforcement agencies (as well as higher education) (Gordon, 1993). Accordingly, most scholars and administrators would agree that American police departments have made significant strides in the past several years in creating strategic plans for their organizations. The community policing movement, for example, has incorporated strategic planning as a key element of its philosophy and is symbolic of effort to reform American policing since 1985. Different from previous reforms attempted throughout the history of American policing, community policing represents an overhaul of almost every facet of public safety mission including community mobilization, innovative programs, and philosophical change (Greene, 2000). A primary feature of this contemporary reform concerns the use of the concept of planned change, particularly a long-term (e.g., 12 months and more) strategic plan, in the implementation and evaluation of innovative activities such as reorientation of patrol and managerial innovations (e.g., employee empowerment). Similarly, COMPSTAT (Computer Statistics) with its primary emphasis on controlling crime geographically, is another example of planning strategically to make the best use of limited organizational resources. In addition, police organizations across the United States have developed long-term plans for fighting terrorism and responding to crisis situations.

Not surprisingly, law enforcement agencies across the nation claim that they have adopted a variety of strategic planning processes. Whether directly or indirectly as a consequence of community policing, strategic planning appears to be here to stay as is apparent from numerous public safety Web sites where strategic plans are posted.
However, given the popularity of strategic planning in American policing, there has been little empirical research on this topic.

The purpose of our research is twofold. First, we attempt to assess the prevalence of strategic planning across U.S. law enforcement organizations in terms of its formation, implementation, and evaluation. Second, we seek to make sense of the data we collect for the purpose of developing theoretical models that conceptualize the styles of strategic planning that are currently being adopted in the United States.

Either of two research approaches usually is employed to study the development of theoretical models. When considerable knowledge is available to support the development of a plausible theory, deductive reasoning is the best guide for choosing an appropriate research methodology. However in the case of strategic planning in American policing, there has been little research on this topic. Consequently, it is more suitable to employ inductive reasoning to explore the development of theoretical models that might capture the styles of strategic planning currently operating in the United States. Data collected for our study originate from two primary sources: (a) a random telephone survey of 100 law enforcement agencies across the nation, and (b) on-site visits for seven law enforcement agencies including interviews with all ranks of employees, examination of official documents, and ride-alongs with police officers. These seven agencies were viewed as representatives of the range of variation in strategic planning styles that were evident as a result of the random telephone survey interviews.

Literature Review

What Is Strategic Planning?

A variety of strategic planning definitions have emerged over the past 30 years (e.g., Gordon, 1993; Koteen, 1997). And although many vary in significant ways, they all share some similarities. Here we define strategic planning as an upper management-initiated process that sets specific goals and identifies measurable steps for success within a division(s) or an entire organization taking into account personnel and budgetary resources. Accordingly, it is a future-oriented process that deliberately anticipates planned change for an organization over a period of time, usually within a span of 2 to 5 years.¹ It also is understood that strategic planning, which is responsive to the need for adaptation to a changing external environment, must be undertaken.

There are at least three elements in this definition that deserve further clarification. First, strategic planning concerns setting up goals of operations that will be implemented during an extended period of time. Each goal may have multiple objectives, and likewise, each objective may have multiple measures. Goals usually are set for the entire period of a strategic plan, but the objectives attached to a goal can differ each year.
Second, strategic planning is a process in which the achievement of an established goal is targeted for accomplishment during a given period of time (e.g., 1 year or 18 months). During that process, the effectiveness of goal achievement will be judged by meeting each objective. Finally, the strategic plan itself often is considered representative of a significant, systematic change in the process of planned change. Goals set in a strategic plan often are related to each other, and strategic planning can be viewed as a holistic approach for achieving goals.

**Historical Overview of Strategic Planning**

*Change in Management Philosophy.* The movement toward strategic planning in the private sector was not an isolated phenomenon in the second half of 20th century. The classical school of management, which had provided the blueprint for management during the first half of the 20th century, had been under severe criticism. The classical school of management was well represented by Frederick Taylor’s Scientific Revolution (e.g., one-best way to accomplish a task) and the principles of the “ideal type” bureaucracy (Taylor, 1911). In essence, this school of thought envisioned a management philosophy whereby organizations operate as a static and closed system isolated from changes in the external environment. Rigid rules and formalization were the primary tools used by administrators to run a company. In addition, the classical school of management paid little attention to the general well-being of employees nor did it seek input from them in the decision-making process (Donaldson, 1995; Gulick, 1937).

In the second half of the 20th century, three primary perspectives challenged the management philosophy and practices of the classical school. First, the closed system of management was being questioned by many scholars. They argued that the dynamic nature of the external environment exerts tremendous pressure on companies, which cannot be ignored (e.g., Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Simon, 1957). Consequently, organizations needed to change their respective operations and structural arrangements to find a fit between them and the environment if their organizations were to survive. Those organizations that failed to change would perish. Furthermore, there was no fixed way of doing things, and organizations needed to come up with practical plans that afforded them adaptability. Second, the incremental change perspective holds the view that organizations need to change over time but the pace of change resembles a “trial and error” approach (Donaldson, 1995; Lindblom, 1968). This is because information concerning change is usually limited. As a result, incremental change is necessary. Change can be initiated with a focus on a few issues that confront an organization. In sum, both approaches highlight the importance of planned change, and the justification of change is based on the dynamics of the external environment.

Finally, the behavioral school of management states that in addition to pressure from the external environment, there is an internally based need to change as well (McGregor, 1960; Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939). The impersonal nature of management under
the classical school no longer fits with demands from within contemporary organizations (Argyris, 1973). Furthermore, employees are motivated and likely to contribute if they are given the opportunity (Deming, 1986; Hackman & Wageman, 1995; Juran, 1969; Ouchi, 1984).

The Development of Strategic Planning

The publication of the article, “Anatomy of Corporate Planning” by Gilmore and Brandenburg in the Harvard Business Review in 1962 marked the beginning of the strategic planning or strategic management movement in the United States. The authors argued that organizations need to change to adapt to a rather dynamic environment. The key to strategic planning centers on the concept of planned change. That is, a company needs to carefully study its position and understand the challenges both externally and internally with a future-oriented emphasis.

Three years later in 1965, Ansoff published the book, Corporate Strategy, which often is considered another milestone in strategic planning. The theme of this book concerns the way private firms can expand their market share and diversify their products. Ansoff pointed out that successful corporate expansion and diversification rely largely on a well-developed and executable plan that outlines the long-term strategy of a company.

Since the 1970s, strategic planning has flourished in the private sector as an effective managerial tool. Many models of strategic planning have been proposed (e.g., strategic management, strategic audit, etc.; Bryson & Roering, 1987). This quick adaptation of strategic planning in the 1970s was closely associated with two factors. First, the market in the private sector became much more competitive and crowded. In order to stay competitive and expand business, private firms had to be more efficient in cutting cost and meeting the demands from customers. Second, companies needed to set their goals and show steps of how to achieve these goals. Strategic planning was a natural answer for these pressures. Toward the end of 1970s, strategic planning became a normal practice in large companies (for a review, please see Rabin, Miller, & Hildreth, 2000).

Because strategic planning primarily is a product of the private sector, it had taken some time before it reached the public sector in the 1980s (Denhardt, 1985). There are three primary factors for the introduction of strategic planning into public sector (Koteen, 1997). The first concerns the change in government service delivery to constituents under the movement of “reinventing government” popularized in the early 1990s. Examples of how local governments can adapt themselves to a changing environment and meet public demand were well illustrated in the book Reinventing Government (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). This perspective argues the need to reform local government services and make them more responsive to constituents. The next factor goes one step beyond and portrays local government agencies as forward-looking and goal-driven. Strategic planning naturally fits this trend well by providing detailed
plans with specific goals to be achieved. Finally, the behavioral school of management proposes a new philosophy of employment empowerment and participation in decision making that has had a significant influence on today’s managers. It is a realization that employee and citizen participation are essential to the success of public services delivery.

**Strategic Planning and Policing**

If strategic planning is a very important tool in the implementation of planned change in private industry then we might expect that this premise holds true in the public sector as well, including the institutionalization of community policing in police agencies across the nation. Law enforcement agencies have been moving toward community-oriented policing (COP) since the 1990s. This is in part because the external environment (e.g., public demand and the police role) has changed significantly. An increasing number of police departments have developed a strategic plan and used that plan as a blueprint to achieve their respective goals by adopting new strategies. Strategic planning is grounded in police management.

However, like many practices in policing, there is lack of systematic knowledge regarding strategic planning in law enforcement organizations. We believe that most of the strategic plans currently developed and implemented in police departments arise out of informal learning from their counterparts or the “trial and error” experiences of an agency.

Prior to the initiation of this research, we conducted a preliminary search on the strategic plans posted on the Web by police agencies in 2003. We next narrowed our focus to a nonrandom sample of 25 municipal police departments across the nation. We observed that there appears to be close linkage between strategic planning and COP among these agencies on Web pages. All these police departments (100%) included COP in the strategic plans, regardless of departmental size. Furthermore, nearly all of them listed specific objectives to be achieved. These specific objectives ranged from an increase in foot patrol, public safety programs to problem-solving activities.

We also noted wide variation in strategic plans, ranging from a maximum of 108 pages developed by Boston Police Department to a minimum of 2 pages prepared by the Sacramento Police Department. The size of the police department did not seem to correlate with the complexity of an agency’s strategic plan. Yet there were substantial differences concerning the projected years it would take for a strategic plan to be implemented, from a maximum of 10 years (Long Beach, CA) to a minimum of 1 year (e.g., Eugene, OR; Boise, ID). On three occasions, the number of years to implement the plan was not even mentioned (e.g., Daytona Beach, FL; Craig, CO). Finally, there was wide variation in three primary areas of strategic planning: the development of a plan, key elements of the plan, and performance measures.
Our observations suggest that there is lack of standardization and uniformity among agencies regarding how best to undertake strategic planning. It seemed to us that, to some extent, agency leaders may have realized the importance of strategic planning but were unsure as to how to go about accomplishing it.

**Methodology**

In this study we employed a two-stage investigation. First, telephone interviews were conducted to better understand the scope of strategic plans implemented in law enforcement agencies across the nation. An advantage of telephone interviews is the ability to communicate directly with the individuals responsible for the strategic plan and the capacity to provide detailed information concerning the formation, implementation, and evaluation of the planning process. Second, based on the results from telephone interviews, seven agencies were selected for site visits that lasted as long as 4 days each. On-site observations were conducted to learn more about strategic planning firsthand by interviewing administrators, patrol officers, and other sworn and nonsworn staff. Site visits also allowed the research team opportunities to examine relevant documents and observe patrol units in operation.

**Telephone Survey of Law Enforcement Agencies**

A list of participants for the telephone survey was derived from the population of law enforcement agencies in the United States that participated in the 2000 Uniform Crime Report. Only municipal, township, state police, and sheriff departments were eligible for a random telephone interview. All special purpose law enforcement agencies such as university police, court police, and park police departments were excluded. We further stratified this sample by size according to three groups of law enforcement agencies: (a) large agencies with more than 100 sworn officers in 2000 (e.g., municipal police, sheriff departments, and state police agencies), (b) medium-sized agencies that hire between 50 to 100 sworn officers, and (c) small agencies (between 25 and 50 sworn personnel).

The use of a telephone interview method instead of a mail survey was based on the rationale that we need talk personally to the individuals who were directly involved with strategic planning. It was speculated that these individuals were the ones who had direct knowledge about the formation, implementation, and evaluation of the strategic plan in their agencies. The COPS Office provided us with the contact information for the agencies that had received funding between 1994 and 2002. Because the COPS Office has funded more than 12,000 law enforcement agencies in United States, about 90% of the law enforcement agency random sample received COPS support. For the remaining 10% of agencies that had not received COPS funding, we located the telephone numbers from their Web site or local municipal governments.
The telephone interview followed this sequence. A researcher from University of Nebraska at Omaha called the designated contact person in an agency and asked for the information if the department had implemented a strategic plan. If not, the interview stopped there. If the answer was positive, the researcher requested the phone number of the person in charge of strategic planning and then attempted contact. We should note that once the right person was available, the interview generally proceeded very smoothly. Less than 1% of prospective respondents declined an interview. The telephone interview questionnaire used in the interviewed was an instrument with both standard questions and open-ended questions about the process of strategic planning. Each interview lasted from 40 to 90 min (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Agency</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Selected</th>
<th>Has Plan</th>
<th>No Plan</th>
<th>No Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Large</td>
<td>862</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>1,026</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small</td>
<td>1,751</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3,639</td>
<td>289</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Site Visits

A total of seven law enforcement agencies was selected from the pool that appeared to represent distinctive strategic planning approaches. The seven agencies were contacted and scheduled for a 3- to 4-day site visit. They initially appeared to represent the agencies in the sample. A team of two or three researchers visited each site depending on the size of the agency. The objective of a site visit was to obtain a more in-depth understanding of the three phrases of the strategic planning process: development, implementation, and evaluation.

The goal of each site visit included three major agenda items. First, police chiefs and command staff were interviewed to learn about the process of development of the strategic plan and the implementation and evaluation components. In particular, one area we wanted to explore includes the relationship between the implementation of COP and strategic planning. Next, we conducted focus group interviews with middle level supervisors and police officers and learned about their assessment of the plan. In addition, researchers were allowed to ride along with patrol officers in each agency to learn firsthand about the community characteristics and issues involved in local law enforcement. We also collected official data from each agency such as calls for service, crime incidents, and other internal reports or evaluations on their self-initiated projects. Finally, the research team conducted an independent assessment of the utility of each strategic plan.
Findings

Results From Telephone Survey

Telephone interviews were employed to collect data pertaining to three phases of strategic planning: formation, implementation, and evaluation of the plan. More specifically, each phase was examined according to several distinct issues.

Phase one: formation of strategic planning. There are three primary reasons for developing a strategic plan typically identified by respondents. The first reason is to “Meet community demands” (91.4% overall). This response indicates that law enforcement agencies must keep informed of issues and make changes that are responsive to demands from local communities. It is interesting to note that large-sized (92.7%) and medium-sized agencies (92.1%) identified this as their top reason but less often did small agencies (83.3%) do so, suggesting that the more employees a law enforcement agency has, the more responsive it perceives it must be to the external environment. The next two reasons were reported at a nearly identical frequency: “To reduce crime” (89.5% overall) and “To let the rank-and-file know what is expected.” This result shows that crime reduction remains a top priority in strategic planning. By comparison, almost one half (46.7%) of the respondents said that “To control social disorder,” was one of the primary reasons for developing a plan. At the same time, small agencies were more likely to find “To control social disorder” as a reason (50.0%) more often than did medium or large agencies.

The survey results also revealed that “To serve as a management tool for upper and middle level managers” was an important reason for developing a plan (87.6% overall). For medium-sized (94.7%) and small agencies (91.7%), this was the most important reason. This suggests that the use of strategic planning among these agencies is for internal management, and the scope of implementation is concentrated at the management level. Finally, the implementation of COP was another reason for the development of strategic plan (54.3% overall).

The top three categories of people participating in the formation process identified by the respondents were police administrators (99.0% overall), police officers (87.5% overall), and civilian employees (76.2% overall). Among these agencies, 49% of agencies invited community organizations to take part in the development of their strategic plan. Finally, we also learned that the smaller the agency, the more likely for the local government to get involved in setting priorities in their plans. The percentage of “members of city government” involvement ranged from 66.7% for smaller agencies, 51.4% for medium-sized ones, to 43.6% for large agencies.

Phase two: implementation of strategic planning. Phase two concerned the implementation of the strategic plan. The first question asked during the telephone interview concerned identifying which party was responsible for the implementation
process. Typically, one of the command staff in a law enforcement agency was given the responsibility for overseeing the daily implementation of the strategic plan (87.6% overall). Similarly, the top administrator, a police chief or sheriff also shared the responsibility for supervising plan implementation (84.8% overall). In terms of provision of ongoing training for implementing the plan, we learned that training seems to be focused on departmental personnel rather than on outside community organizations or residents. For example, 64.7% (overall) of the departments reported that sworn supervisors received in-service training. Similarly, 62.7% (overall) of agencies offered training for police officers, and 51.5% (overall) of agencies also provided in-service training for civilian employees.

In terms of regular meetings during the implementation phase, a large number of agencies (66.0% overall) reported holding meetings regarding the strategic plan for supervisors. Meetings for police officers (45.6% overall) and civilian employees (40.8%) accounted for less than one half of the time for the law enforcement departments surveyed. The survey findings also showed that the community organizations and residents were less likely to be informed about the status of implementing the strategic plan. In addition, 76% of all agencies revised their plan. That means a large majority of them were likely to implement a second strategic plan. Also, respondents were given a list of reasons for the most recent revision. The top three reasons for plan revision during the implementation were “Keeping up-to-date” (28.0% overall), “Change in budget” (20.0%), and “External demands” (17.3%). Of the law enforcement departments surveyed, 42% reported that a designated unit was assigned this responsibility, followed by the Chief’s or Sheriff’s office (21.2% overall).

Phase three: evaluation of the strategic plan. In this section, we present information relevant for understanding how strategic plans are evaluated and what kind of methods is used to assess the accomplishment of goals. About 80.0% of agencies stated that the strategic plans implemented were formally assessed. In addition, the data derived from the interview suggested that these agencies examined their plans about every 7 months (7.12 overall).

This most commonly used information to assess goal achievement was “jurisdiction-wide crime data” (80.6%), reflecting the priority of crime reduction in these plans. Also, the size of a department was positively associated with the use of crime data. For example, large agencies were more likely to use jurisdiction-wide crime data (83.3%) than small agencies (66.7%). The next widely used data in goal assessment was “District-specific crime data” with 71.8% of all agencies reportedly using it. Again, department size was closely correlated with the use of specific crime data among these agencies. In addition, citizen survey was another commonly used approach to examine if a specific goal was achieved (47.6% overall). Finally, we noted that small agencies were more likely to use a “Statistical package to analyze crime data.”

In terms of dissemination of information, a question was asked to find the recipient of a copy of the progress report. Individuals who regularly received a progress
report included the police chief or sheriff (90.7%), command staff (84.4% overall), middle level supervisors (61.9% overall), and other government agencies (52.6%). This suggests that implementation of a strategic plan in law enforcement agencies is primarily supervised by police administrators who are kept informed about the progress of the plan. By comparison, 41.2% of agencies regularly made their progress reports available for police officers. Moreover, 67.0% of agencies reported that “the implementation of COP was addressed in the plan.”

Finally, the list of the major strengths and weaknesses of strategic planning was identified during the telephone interviews using open-ended questions. The researchers grouped responses into different themes mentioned by the respondents. Strategic planning predominantly was viewed as “A comprehensive approach to tackle the issues and plan for the future.” More than one half of the large agencies (55.6%) and 39.5% of medium-sized ones identified this as the primary strength of the plan. By comparison, only 10.0% of the small agencies shared this view.

The next commonly noted strength of strategic planning was that it offered a “Specific plan with specific goals and budget” (27.5% overall). This result suggests that departments prefer specific goals that also are associated with specified costs. Alternatively, agencies reported that a major weakness of strategic planning was “Lack of resources” (32.6%). However, to a large extent, perceived weaknesses appear to depend on the unique situation that challenge individual departments.

Findings From Site Visits

In the previous section, our research suggested that law enforcement agencies varied according to the strategic plans they created. This section attempts to offer additional insights about the role of strategic planning among the selected agencies. Seven municipal police or county sheriff’s offices were selected for site visits. There were three considerations for the selection of a field trip. The first consideration was the geographic location. We attempted to select law enforcement agencies that were spread out across the nation. The second consideration concerned the size of the law enforcement departments chosen for visits. We elected to select law enforcement agencies that fell in the range of large (100+) and medium-sized agencies (50+ sworn employees). Finally, we also decided to include both municipal police agencies and sheriff’s offices in our visitations. Though both kinds of departments share law enforcement functions, they differ substantially in many ways such as the demographic factors and local political structure. It is important to note that except for one large department that declined our request for a site visit, the remaining seven agencies chosen agreed and were very supportive of our visits.

The demographic characteristics for each of the seven sites are shown in Table 2. It is evident that there is wide variation in the demographic attributes of the communities we visited. For example, the size of the community ranged from a high of 1.6 million population (City B) to a low of 21,900 (City E). These seven agencies
generally reflected locations spread across the United States except for the South. Many studies have found that the local political culture differs across geographic regions (e.g., Knoke, 1982; Stucky, 2005). Those exemplifying “more efficient government” with council-manager type of government, for example, are more likely to be located in the West Coast (Jacobs & Wood, 1999; Trejo, 1991; Walker, 1977). The communities are also different in several other important ways. A few communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency Type</th>
<th>Geographic Location</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Income per Resident ($)</th>
<th>Minority Population (%)</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City A Police dept.</td>
<td>Southwest</td>
<td>650,000+</td>
<td>24,000+</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Hi-tech city with 15 years of steady growth; 25% of residents with college degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City B Police dept.</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>1.3 million+</td>
<td>19,800+</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Booming housing market; headquarters of large firms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City C Police dept.</td>
<td>Northwest</td>
<td>200,000+</td>
<td>22,000+</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Steady economic growth; many residents moved from CA; unemployment rate: 4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City D Police dept.</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>50,000+</td>
<td>31,000+</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Most construction in past 15 years; a middle class town away from a big city with $19,000+ income per person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City E Police dept.</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>21,000+</td>
<td>31,000+</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Major traffic through the city; 45% of residents with college degree and 9.3% under age of 18, well below national average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County A Sheriff’s office</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>151,000+</td>
<td>55,000+</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>30 miles from a major city, which lost 10% population in the past 10 years; county population increased 23% in 10 years; 25% houses built in 1990s; booming county</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County B Sheriff’s office</td>
<td>East coast of Mid-Atlantic Region</td>
<td>84,000+</td>
<td>19,000+</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>80,000 additional population during workdays; medical center serving 300,000; diversified community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
are large, metropolitan cities (City A and B) whereas others are more typically suburban communities located within commuting distance of a big city (County A and City D). Average incomes in these communities (e.g., County A) are higher than in urban areas (City B) and their minority population is relatively small (e.g., 2.9% in County A and 5% in City D). In comparison, there are other communities that are small in size but serve as major commercial center or commuting center. The daytime population is significantly different from weekend and night (County B).

An agency’s external environment affects organizational behavior according to many scholars in management science (Donaldson, 1995; Fennell, 1980; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Marsden, Cook, & Kalleberg, 1994; Riggs, 1975; Thompson, 1967). The differences in community characteristics discussed above may impose different demands to local law enforcement agencies. In the COP model, scholars have consistently argued that policing practices should fit the needs of a community (Eck & Rosenbaum, 1994; Skolnick & Bayley, 1987; Trojanowicz & Bucqueroix, 1990). If this is true then the strategic plan that serves as a blueprint for police operations should differ from each other. The characteristics of these seven law enforcement agencies and their respective strategic plans are reported in Table 3.

Table 3 reveals some interesting characteristics of these law enforcement agencies. First, the city population, to a large extent, determines the size of the department. In the sample, although the largest police agency (Police B) employed 2,900 sworn officers, only 30 sworn employees were assigned to the patrol unit in Sheriff’s Office A. The rest of the deputies in Sheriff’s Office A were responsible for jail operation and court security. The culture of Sheriff’s Office A was certainly different from other municipal police agencies. Although every officer in a police department is relatively equal, deputies working in patrol section in Sheriff’s Office A took great pride in their assignment. This is because the majority of deputies in Sheriff’s Office A works in jail operation and would love to perform patrol duty with the authority to carry a firearm.

Second, crime and social disorder patterns varied significantly across these site visit agencies and strategic plans also differed. In one instance, police officers patrolled one of the most dangerous neighborhoods with serious gang problems in the United States (Police B). Here officers were busy responding to calls. In the headquarters of Police Department B, we first saw the photos of two officers killed in the line of duty a year earlier. The strategic plan for the department reflected a strong emphasis on law enforcement—crime reduction in some areas and quality of life in others. During the interview with the chief and deputy chief, we were told that the 2-year plan was created on purpose to be more flexible with the dynamics of the external environment. Police officers in the two districts knew the strategic plan implemented and were able to link their performance evaluation with the implementation of the plan. Police Department A is also a large agency with 1,300 officers. However, the city is known as a hi-tech oriented center. With a major research university and headquarters of large corporations, the crime rate in City A was relatively
### Table 3

#### Seven Site Visits—Characteristics of Law Enforcement Agencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Size (Sworn Officers)</th>
<th>Crime/Disorder Issue</th>
<th>Policing Issues</th>
<th>Strategic Plan</th>
<th>Extensiveness of the Plan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Police dept. A</td>
<td>1,300</td>
<td>One of the lowest crime cities with population 50,000+, 96% of residents feel safe during the day.</td>
<td>Major technical updates in past 3 years (new crime lab). Strong advocate of COP.</td>
<td>First implemented in 1997. 1-year plan &amp; budget driven.</td>
<td>Comprehensive plan with six goals covering crime from “crime suppressing” to “quality of life”; both an organizational tool and crime reduction tool by showing numbers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police dept. B</td>
<td>2,900</td>
<td>Like big cities, crime dropped in past 10 years but high in some precincts.</td>
<td>Fear of crime varies by precincts. Focusing on law enforcement activities. There were COP programs.</td>
<td>2-year plan with special focus on high crime areas.</td>
<td>Four overall goals: crime suppression, leadership, neighborhood safety, and infrastructure; performance evaluation associated with the plan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police dept. C</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>Low crime rate in similar city size.</td>
<td>No crime-ridden neighborhood and strong emphasis on police/comm unity interaction service.</td>
<td>First implemented in 2003. 2-year plan.</td>
<td>Four goals: positive relationship with community, maximize service orientation, improvement in management, and quality of life improvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police dept. D</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Violent crimes are rare and no crime-ridden neighborhood. Infrequent property crimes</td>
<td>Aggressively checking vehicle plate with new technology. Friendly to community residents.</td>
<td>1-year plan called Balance Score Card.</td>
<td>Comprehensive measures that cover all aspects of police work were developed. BSC is part of the city evaluation system. COP is part of it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police dept. E</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>No murder and number of Part I crimes dropped from 969 to 864 in 2002.</td>
<td>Heavy traffic was big problem. COP programs were popular.</td>
<td>First plan in 1997. 3-year plan.</td>
<td>Goals of the plan: develop well-trained officers, upgrade technology, reevaluate existing programs, etc.</td>
</tr>
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(continued)
low and a strong tie with community became one of the top priorities. The comprehensive plan covered six areas from crime suppression to quality of life. The level of understanding the plan resembled an upside-down pyramid. That is, the lower the level, the narrower the perception of the plan. The individuals who were most familiar with the strategic plan were the Chief of Police, commanders, and executive staff groups who actively participated in the development and implementation of the plan.

The most notable agency with a strong community emphasis is Police Department C (286 sworn officers). Blessed by low crime rates and the absence of a crime-infested neighborhood, the goals included in the strategic plan focused on positive relationship with community, service orientation, and improvement in management skills. The knowledge of the plan among patrol officers was very limited. Similarly, Police Department D is located in a typical middle class community. Crime incidents were infrequent. During our ride-along, officers ambitiously checked vehicle plates if there was any questionable sign something was amiss (e.g., the type of automobile, the age of the driver, etc.). New technology enabled them to get the response from their laptop computer within 10s. The strategic plan, Balance Score Card (BSC), was comprehensive and covered all the units in the department. The BSC was developed by the city government and all municipal departments had to use BSC for their annual evaluation. The chief and command staff had comprehensive knowledge of the progress of the plan, whereas patrol officers had little idea about the implementation of BSC.
Sheriff’s Office B represents a unique case. Though located in a suburban area, there were pockets of high crime. Whereas most agencies saw a continuous drop in crime during the early 2000s, Sheriff’s Office B experienced an increase in the crime rate and the juvenile crime rate in the county was the second highest in the state. The 5-year strategic plan was comprehensive in nature with specific goals and objectives to achieve. The plan was developed by the command staff. Similarly, the actual knowledge of the progress of the strategic plan implementation was limited to the command staff (Sheriff and Majors) whereas patrol deputies and sergeants knew very little about it.

**Discussion**

In developing a theoretical model, it was not our intention to create a new theory of change to describe variation across the strategic plans we observed. Rather, we opted to follow a long tradition in organizational research and develop theoretical models or typologies that tended to simplify our understanding of behaviors at the organizational or individual level. In this regard, the theoretical models we propose are derived from this research tradition and begin with the identification of crucial dimensions that are able to differentiate organizations into relevant perspectives.

At the organizational level, the use of a typology to conceptualize variation among organizations is very common in the history of management science, from Burns and Stalker’s three sequential studies carried out within 20 industrial firms in the United Kingdom (Burns & Stalker, 1961). The most well-known finding emerging from this project was the identification of two “ideal types” of structural characteristics and patterns of management displayed among these firms, namely, the “organic” and “mechanistic” types of organizations found in this group of 20 companies. More specifically, “mechanistic” organizational forms were found to predominate among the firms operating in a relatively stable task environment. The demand from the environment of these firms was fairly consistent and predictable. In contrast, “organic” forms of organization tended to predominate in organizations that were located in relatively changeable or dynamic operational environments (also see Emery & Trist, 1965; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967).

Similarly, one of the early studies on the relationship between the level of technology used and structural characteristics was proposed by Charles Perrow (1967) who provided a more elaborate model to theorize the relationship between the pattern of use of operational technologies and differentiation of organizational arrangements. Perrow (1967, p. 196) developed a typology of organizations based on two technological dimensions. The first dimension concerns the application of technology—whether or not the problems of production are subject to standardization. The second dimension relates to the nature of the “raw materials” processed at the input stage.
At the individual level, Hersey and Blanchard’s (1996) leadership styles (managerial grid) are well known in research on management. They identified two dimensions that distinguish leaders: relationship behavior (concern for people) versus task behavior (concern for production). Consequently, four categories of managerial styles (participating, selling, telling, and delegating) can be derived based on high and low on each dimension (Hersey & Blanchard, 1996, p. 193). In policing research, there is a long list of scholars who have used typologies to differentiate police officers such as their law enforcement styles (Broderick, 1977; Coates, 1972; White, 1972) and their value orientations (He, Zhao, & Lovrich, 2002; Rokeach, 1973). For example, based on his field study in a medium-sized police department, Muir (1977) identified two salient dimensions: perspective versus passion. Consequently, four typologies of police officers can be derived from these two dimensions: professionals, avoiders, reciprocators, and enforcers.

Based on the field study on the discretion exercised among public service providers, particularly police officers, Vinzant and Crothers in their book *Street Level Leadership* (1998, p. 91) identified two crucial dimensions that explain the variety of behaviors displayed by public service providers: the outcome dimension versus process dimension. Subsequently, four types of public service providers can be distinguished.

In this study, the first task for the establishment of theoretical models is to identify two dimensions that are able to capture the variation of strategic plans adopted by police agencies. Following Max Weber, we identify two key dimensions at the organizational level. Weber (1977) observed the emergence of formal bureaucratic organization as an inevitable consequence of social evolution and organizational structure is a key element to achieve such rationality. He further elaborated on two essential dimensions concerning structural arrangements (Weber, 1977, pp. 196-230). The vertical dimension establishes the relationship of people working in a formal organization. Authority is located based on positions within a hierarchical order. The horizontal dimension is concerned with the distribution of special functions in an organization.

### Two Dimensions of the Implementation Grid to Differentiate Strategic Planning in Law Enforcement Agencies

Based on a Weberian view of organizational complexity that is primarily vertical (control and flow of information) versus horizontal (the complexity of the task) and previous studies discussed above, we identified two dimensions of organizational differentiation that are able to distinguish strategic plan styles adopted by the law enforcement agencies we studied. Each dimension can be conceived of as varying along a continuum where the left side represents the lowest level and the highest level is depicted to the far right.

**A. The extent of coverage under the strategic plan (width).** The first dimension reflects the number of divisions or units that are included in a law enforcement
agency’s strategic plan. Some police agencies developed their plans inclusive of the entire organization. In such a case, specific goals and measures were identified for all major divisions or units (e.g., patrol division or precinct). Alternatively, other agencies implemented plans that were very limited in their scope. Only a few units were expected to participate in the development and implementation of the plan. To a large extent, this dimension reflects the extent of horizontal involvement a law enforcement agency has in strategic planning.

**B. The extent of hierarchical involvement in strategic plan (depth).** A second dimension refers to the number of ranks involved in the strategic planning process. In some departments, only top administrators (the chief or deputy chiefs) were involved in the plan. Alternatively, there were law enforcement agencies in which patrol officers were expected to also fully participate in strategic planning. Hierarchical involvement reflects the extent of employee involvement. Thus, the key question that arises is, does the agency want to create a plan primarily for management purposes or does it intend to include rank-and-file officers and thereby hold them accountable for the plan that is created?

Arranging these two dimensions on a continuum from limited involvement to full participation across divisions and ranks, four models of strategic planning in law enforcement agencies emerge. These models fit the profiles of strategic plans in the seven agencies we observed.

**Implementation Grid: Four Models of Strategic Planning**

Figure 1 shows the relationship between the two dimensions and four models. The extent of application (the horizontal dimension) varies from one or two units involved to a department-wide approach. Similarly, the vertical dimension refers to how hierarchical the plan is with regard to employee participation. Here participation can be very limited, implying something that management developed on its own, versus being very inclusive from top to bottom and thus including points of view throughout the agency.

**Model 1: In-depth planning model with limited application (rank involvement—high and the extent of application—low).** This model can be the beginning of a broader change with a relatively narrower focus involving strategic planning as applied to only one or two divisions/precincts in an agency. Goals and measures are set up for the relevant division(s), whereas other units may not be directly involved. But in contrast to the strategic plan’s limited horizontal complexity, the vertical dimension is expansive such that all employees from top administrators to line officers are involved in planning and implementation. From our site visits, it appears that Police Department B is a good example of this model. Their Policing Plan involved mainly the patrol and support divisions. Beat officers in one district were able to identify the goals and objec-
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Features of this model include the following:

- Efficient use of limited resources: If the resources that are available cannot support full implementation of the agency’s strategic plan, this model can be used to present choices.
- Focus on a few selected divisions: If a law enforcement agency faces a few issues that seem very important to several divisions or units, this model might be appropriate. For example, if reduction in juvenile crime is identified as a key issue, a juvenile unit can work out a systematic strategic plan regarding how to reduce juvenile crime in the community. An advantage of this model is that the extent of change is limited or manageable. It provides a means of experimentation before extensive change takes place.
- Support from employees: An important point here is that the objectives implemented really reflect the needs for the department. In particular, consensus is key and the model can gain the full support of agency employees.
- Goals, objectives, and measures are relatively easy to develop. The implementation of the strategic plan in one or a few divisions is relatively easy to manage in all three phases because it is easier to reach consensus on what must be done within a unit or division rather than requiring a fix that is department-wide.

![Figure 1: Implementation Grid: Four Models of Strategic Planning](image_url)
**Model 2: Top leadership in charge model (rank involvement—low and the extent of application—low).** Befitting this model, there is limited involvement in planning below the executive level of management. Typically, the top two layers of the organization, usually the chief and his or her immediate lieutenants, are in charge of implementation and nearly exclusively are the ones with full knowledge of the plan’s progress. Dissemination of the information on the strategic plan is infrequent, and thus, most employees have very limited knowledge concerning the status of the plan. Strictly speaking, law enforcement agencies that adopt this model do not fully comply with the essential principle of strategic planning: consensus building, employee participations, and dissemination of information. From our observations, it appears that the Sheriff’s Office in County B is such an example because the chief executive was the primary architect of the plan with assistance from several command staff members.

Features of this model include the following:

- A useful blueprint to request for resources from city or county government because the plan outlines the direction the agency is headed. An obvious advantage of this model is to provide a general direction for where the agency is heading in the next few years. Consequently, external resources can be sought based on the plan.
- Consensus exists among top administrators about the future of the department.
- Incremental, controlled planning develops so that the risk of dramatic change is low.
- Little support from employees because most of them are neither informed nor interested. This is a serious drawback of this model. Employees are not asked to participate in the development or implementation of the plan. Consequently, the legitimacy of the plan is only limited to the top management level.

**Model 3: Management model (rank involvement—low and the extent of application—high).** Law enforcement agencies employing this model develop strategic plans that are usually department-wide. Most divisions are included in the plan and, as a consequence, have specific goals and measures that apply uniquely to them. Updates are frequent and formal and measures are in place to assess goal attainment in each division. But in contrast to elevated horizontal complexity, this model features low hierarchical involvement, usually limited to the command staff level, and as a result, line officers typically are not aware of the plan. Police Department C exemplifies this model. For this agency, their strategic plan is comprehensive and updates are frequent, formal, and detailed. The plan not only serves as a mechanism of internal control but also is included as part of the annual evaluation process that the city uses to assess departmental performance. This model also features the goals and measures that are specific to the agency.

Features of this model include the following:

- It can be an effective management tool to keep track of the divisions. A major advantage of this model is that the management team can closely track progress. Data collected can be impressive and analysis of crime trends and other patterns is usually conducted at management meetings.
• It demonstrates departmental achievements to external interests. The updates of strategic plan are effective to document the departmental priorities and progress to city government or other interested parties. In addition, the strategic plan under this model can be used by local government to evaluate the chief and the performance of the department.
• It produces consensus among commanders on the priorities of the department and the allocation of resources.
• It demonstrates departmental priorities to the community.

**Model 4: Total implementation model (rank involvement—high and the extent of application—high).** This model entails a fundamental change in the way law enforcement agencies set priorities and manage personnel and resources. Here implementation of the strategic plan is department-wide, thus involving all divisions. Goals, objectives, and measures are formally set at each level. In addition, all employees from the executive level to rank-and-file officers are held accountable according to the strategic plan. In fact, the strategic plan becomes the agency’s blueprint for daily operations and change. This model indicates a total transformation of a law enforcement agency from a reactive approach of management to a proactive approach with the participation of all the employees. This is actually the model that reflects all the principles of strategic planning. The implementation of COP will truly benefit from the adaptation of this model. It is important to note that in our site visits, we did not come across a department that completely fits this model but it is our hope that law enforcement agencies that adapted other models will move closer to the use of this model.

Features of this model include the following:

• The strategic plan becomes the driving force for departmental change. Every organization needs to change to adapt to a changing environment. It is reasonable to argue that planned and proactive change is better than unplanned and reactive change. In this sense, strategic planning under this model represents planned change in an organization. The implementation of this model requires a fundamental change in many areas such as planning, organizational change, and performance evaluation.
• Sworn officers at every rank are held accountable for their assignments. New evaluation methods are developed to hold employees accountable. For example, problem-solving activities can be incorporated into performance evaluation. Community surveys can also be used to indicate the performance of patrol beats, etc.
• The community is familiar with the agency’s strategic plan.
• Organizational change (e.g., COP) can be formally documented and updated in accordance with the plan. There is a good fit between strategic planning and community policing because they share very similar principles of organizational change.
• Consensus exists among employees with regard to where the department is headed. If the plan is written with the participation of employees in the development of goals, objectives, and specific measures, the plan derives legitimacy from employees.
• The level of change is significant and the risks associated with conflict and turmoil and even failure are elevated because substantial change (and especially cultural change) is difficult.
Conclusion

This study attempted to identify organizational characteristics associated with the implementation of strategic planning in law enforcement agencies. Due to the lack of extant research, we decided to take an inductive approach to answer this research question. Based on the data collected from our site visits, we found two dimensions that appeared the most salient for differentiating law enforcement agencies. Similar to the literature in management science, the use of a typology helps to conceptualize strategic planning easier. Accordingly, we would like to offer two observations. The first observation concerns the application of this model. We believe that these two dimensions can be applied to other types of organizational change or innovations. For example, COP has become an important feature of organizational change in American policing since 1990s. There have been studies attempting to investigate this reform. For example, Cordner (1997) identified four dimensions of change regarding community policing. Our models seem to capture the extent of reform in COP. Although we did not directly observe any agencies to score highly on both dimensions, hopefully there are some that can be held up as guides for others to follow.

Our second observation concerns theoretical development in policing research. We believe that this research helps to move forward toward creating a contemporary theoretical model that might be the first step in development of a comprehensive theory that can explain change in American police organizations. Such theoretical development is likely to be a slow and incremental process. We sincerely hope that future studies can add to important theoretical advancement.

Notes

1. The length of strategic planning varies. Overall, if a plan carries the meaning of strategic planning, 3 to 5 year period is recommended.
2. It is important to note that many law enforcement agencies already have adopted strategic plans but simply have not bothered to post these on the Web (e.g., Omaha Police Department, NE, Wichita Police Department, KS, and Spokane Police Department, WA).

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