Chapter 9
Using Web 2.0 as a Community Policing Strategy:
An Examination of the United States Municipal Police Departments

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ABSTRACT

Community policing is intended to empower citizens who are plagued by crime and disorder. Scholars have considered community policing as a proactive measure that addresses issues of disorder to prevent the occurrence of more serious crimes (Goldstein, 1986; Wilson & Kelling, 1982). In a digital age, people are increasingly interacting socially via web platforms. This digital interaction includes governments, which can interact with the citizens in their society to co-produce effective responses to criminal activity. Social media applications such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, iPhone applications, and Nixle provide new media for citizens and police interactions. Using a sample of 163 municipal police departments, this chapter examines the level and type of participation among municipal police departments using these resources. It is argued that Web 2.0 social media applications allow for a more fluent and dialogic relationship between citizens and police to work together to reduce crime and increase community livability. Policy and practice recommendations related to participating in and enhancing social media presence for police are also provided.

INTRODUCTION

Several dimensions of community policing have emerged since its inception in the early 80's. However, the main objectives and components of community oriented policing have remained stable. Community-oriented policing's intended objective and components remain the empowerment and engagement of citizens in defining and providing public safety services.

Scholars have considered community policing as a proactive measure that addresses issues of disorder to prevent the occurrence of bigger crimes (Goldstein, 1986; Wilson & Kelling, 1982). However, Travis & Langworthy (2008) have presented the view that community policing is really a reactive type of policing. Since the police merely operate on the definitions and standards of safety that emerge from the community and that community members are part of the policing strategy. Thus, a real community policing philosophy requires an active participation from the public.

In a digital age, people are increasing their social interactions via web platforms. Governments, who have used it to interact with the citizens in their society, have increasingly adopted this digital approach. However, there has been scant specific analysis of the extent to which public safety agencies, such as the police, have taken advantage of these web platforms in order to enhance co-producing efforts. Facebook, Twitter, blogs, iPhone applications, and Nixle provide new media for citizens and police interactions. The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) has actively encouraged police departments to take advantage of Web 2.0 social applications and its potential for reaching out to communities. In this regard, the IACP has recently developed a social media unit to advise police departments. Likewise, the IACP has partnered with the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) to introduce a series of brief monographs explaining some of the beneficial aspects of these applications. Recently, these organizations have published a report describing how police depart-

ments have been using Web 2.0 as a community oriented policing tool (IACPa, 2010).

With this background, this chapter assesses the extent of US municipal police departments' use of Web 2.0 social media applications. The analysis also examines the nature of usage for these applications. These assessments are based on the International Association of Chiefs of Police's (IACPb-f, 2010) recommendations on how these Web 2.0 applications could be utilized to assist police departments in the performance of their mission. In addition, the study devised some constructs that would measure empirically the use of Web 2.0 media platforms as community policing tools.

This study gains paramount importance since it presents the current state of police departments' adaptation of an emerging technology. As history has shown, the police have constantly taken advantage of technology to enhance their services. This chapter identifies the level of usages and the efforts made by police departments in using modern technology to engage citizens. Thus, this research provides a systematic study of the use of Web 2.0 applications among the largest municipal police agencies in the United States by answering the following research questions:

1. To what extent are social media (Web 2.0) applications being currently utilized by police agencies? This research question hopes to provide insights on how departments have adhered to the specific recommendations of the IACP on the uses of Web 2.0. In addition, the study would identify innovative approaches that are beyond the recommendations of the IACP.
2. How do police agencies use Web 2.0 social media applications as tools for community policing strategies? Since Web 2.0 social media applications are communications and networking tools, the study evaluated aspects of this research question in terms of the departments' use of the platforms for having a)

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