

Review

Walking and Biking the Beat: Operationalizing Proactive Community Engagement

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Abstract

Community-oriented policing (COP) has long been hailed as an approach to enhancing community trust in police, addressing community problems proactively rather than reactively, and fostering police-community engagement. However, some law enforcement agencies experience difficulty in translating the broad philosophy of COP into a practical and actionable strategy. Agencies cannot expect to fulfill COP objectives without a structured plan and accountability for achieving this goal. Therefore, drawing on existing themes for operationalizing proactive community engagement, this paper brings current research and best practices together to present a set of evidence-based strategies for COP foot and bike patrols. We highlight relevant considerations and tips that may be underscored in the minutiae of implementation within the COP foot and bike patrol process, yet remain critical to success. By operationalizing COP foot and bike patrols at several stages, the authors aim to assist agencies in striving for more than just symbolic or temporary approaches to COP.

Keywords: community policing; foot patrols; proactive community engagement; guidance

1. Introduction

Police agencies and communities must work together to solve complex crime problems, as they often share similar goals and cooperation tends to yield better outcomes (Skogan and Hartnett 1997; U.S. Department of Justice 2019). However, it is incredibly difficult to address the root of these issues without proactive forms of policing, such as community-oriented policing (COP). Taking a community policing approach is optimal for addressing community concerns, as evidence indicates that it increases positive perceptions of the police (Gill et al. 2014; Peyton et al. 2019), community willingness to cooperate (Peyton et al. 2019), and can reduce crimes such as gun use, drug use, robbery and burglary (Ekici et al. 2022).

Despite its importance and evidence of effectiveness, many police departments struggle to implement strategies to support community policing in a meaningful and sustainable manner. Its definition, tactics, and implementation vary widely across agencies (Chappell 2009; Fields 2007; Greene 1987; Mastrofski et al. 2007; Scheider et al. 2009; Seagrave 1996; Terpstra 2009), and COP is perceived as a stated philosophy rather than an operational strategy in and of itself (Chappell 2009; Marcou 2025). Compounding these issues, community policing implementation faces distinct practical challenges, including resource



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constraints and a lack of guidance (Chappell 2009; Cowell and Kringen 2016; Lum et al. 2020; Mastrofski et al. 2007; Terpstra 2009).

Research has consistently noted that the proliferation of specific community policing practices and programs, many of which rise in popularity and fade quickly, has constrained scholars' ability to rigorously evaluate individual community policing strategies over time (Gill et al. 2014). Wilson (2004) similarly observed that little progress has been made in developing consistent performance measures that determine whether community policing is implemented as intended. As a result, much of the research has focused on whether a specific community policing strategy or type of program is associated with positive outcomes. The results of which do not offer evidence-based guidance on how agencies should operationalize strategies in practice.

Importantly, these implementation challenges are not unique to community policing. Similar concerns have been raised across other modern approaches to policing, such as evidence-based policing and problem-oriented policing, where strong empirical support coexists with persistent difficulties translating principles into consistent practice (den Heyer 2022; Lum et al. 2020; Piza and Welsh 2021; Telep 2017; Weisburd and Neyroud 2011). Furthermore, a growing body of literature has called for an extension of evidence-based policing that is not only grounded in research but also practitioner-centered and customizable to community contexts (Klose 2024; Koper et al. 2025; Santos and Santos 2019; Scheider et al. 2009).

Therefore, community policing represents one instance of a broader implementation challenge in contemporary policing, reflecting the difficulty that agencies face in translating abstract, evidence-based principles into structured, applicable practices that are implemented with fidelity and accountability. This aligns with Dawson and Stanko's (2013) guidance, which shows that even rigorous evaluations can yield limited or misleading conclusions when initiatives lack program integrity, reflected in inconsistent design and delivery (e.g., guidance, training, implementation, monitoring) across settings or personnel. Addressing this challenge requires attention not only to whether strategies are supported by evidence, but also to how they are operationalized, adapted, and sustained within real-world policing environments.

Santos and Santos' (2019) translational criminology framework provides a useful lens for situating this work. The framework conceptualizes police research as a multi-phase process that moves evidence to practice. Phase I ("Does it work?") focuses on conducting research to determine if strategies work, and Phase 2 ("What works?") synthesizes and disseminates findings to identify evidence-based approaches. Phase III ("How to make it work?") shifts attention to implementation and evaluation of strategies, including real-world application. Finally, Phase IV ("Make it work!") centers on institutionalization and sustainability, emphasizing the importance of embedding practices within agencies over time through leadership and organizational structure.

Drawing on Santos and Santos' (2019) framework, the present study is explicitly situated within Phase III. Although prior research has demonstrated a range of community policing approaches associated with positive outcomes, far less is known about how such strategies are operationalized in practice, how they are integrated into routines, and how implementation shapes their effectiveness over time. Consistent with the goals of translational criminology, the current review focuses on practice-based insights that move beyond determining whether strategies work and toward clarifying how agencies can trans-late evidence into structured and sustainable practices.

To avoid the common pitfall of attempting to address community policing in its entirety, this article focuses on a single, concrete strategy that directly operationalizes proactive community engagement through foot and bicycle patrol. Foot and bike patrols,

among the most common COP strategies (Chappell 2009; Gill et al. 2014; Skogan and Frydl 2004; U.S. Department of Justice 2019), serve as an effective means of operationalizing community policing (Menton 2008; Skogan and Frydl 2004; Sytsma and Piza 2018; U.S. Department of Justice 2019; Wakefield 2007).

Although foot patrol and bike patrols differ mechanically, they share a critical operational characteristic that distinguishes them from traditional vehicle-based patrol. Officers are physically present in public space, walking or riding, rather than enclosed in a patrol car. This mode of deployment increases visibility, accessibility, and informal contact with community members, making both strategies especially well-suited for proactive engagement.

The purpose of this article is therefore twofold. First, it synthesizes the existing evidence on foot and bike patrol as mechanisms for enhancing community engagement. Second, it situates that evidence within a broader discussion of how agencies can move beyond abstract endorsement of a community policing philosophy toward structured, implementable, and sustainable engagement practices. Guided by Santos and Santos' (2024) guidebook for implementing proactive community engagement, the article then translates this evidence into practical guidance for agencies seeking to operationalize foot and bike patrol. Specifically, the discussion is organized around three core implementation themes identified by Santos and Santos (2024): (1) defining expectations, (2) engaging leaders, and (3) establishing accountability. Each theme concludes with operational mechanisms for translating the preceding discussion into concrete, action-oriented steps that agencies can implement. Through this structure, the article aims to bridge the gap between research and practice by clarifying not only what the evidence suggests, but how foot and bike patrol can be operationalized as part of an evidence-based community policing strategy.

2. The Prevalence of Foot and Bike Patrols

The core principles of community policing are centered on decentralization of the police agency, problem-solving rather than just being reactive, motivating the community to establish mechanisms for addressing crime, and communicating with the community and prioritizing its needs (Skogan and Hartnett 1997). While a singular strategy typically will not achieve these broader goals, it serves as an essential gateway to initiate more in-depth, long-term partnerships. Without actionable and accountable first steps, the collaboration and problem-solving process will never gain adequate traction (Santos and Santos 2024).

Foot and bike patrols were selected foremost because several studies have supported their effectiveness in sparking the broader goals of community policing (Groff et al. 2013; Kringen et al. 2018; Menton 2008; Simpson 2017; Skogan and Frydl 2004; Sytsma and Piza 2018; Trojanowicz 1983). For example, Sytsma and Piza (2018) found that officers on bike patrol had more contacts with the public and higher rates of proactive policing. Likewise, Menton (2008) found that those on bike patrols had twice as much contact with the public as opposed to those on traditional assignments. These findings provide crucial support for this form of community policing because officers who engage with more community members and engage in proactive policing will be better suited and equipped to address root issues and develop partnerships with local stakeholders (Reisig 2010; Skogan and Hartnett 1997). Kringen et al. (2018) also found supporting evidence of the resulting benefits of foot patrols. More specifically, officers who spend more time on foot patrols were more likely to identify community problems (Kringen et al. 2018).

Community members also perceive officers on foot or bike patrols as more friendly and approachable (Caldwell 2016; Corder 2010; Mroz 2001; Skogan 2008). Moreover, foot patrols are often viewed as an advantageous and non-threatening community policing strategy (Wakefield 2007). For instance, Simpson (2017) discovered that officers on foot or bike patrols are perceived more favorably than those in a vehicle. Furthermore, officers

on bikes often pique youth's interest and engagement, thereby helping improve positive perceptions, especially among children ([ASU Center for Problem-Oriented Policing n.d.](#); [Salt Lake City Police Department n.d.](#)). Finally, [Kahn et al. \(2019\)](#) found that after the implementation of community engagement patrols, which include foot patrols, there were increased reports of positive interactions with police and no increase in negative reports, which is crucial given that the majority of recorded police-initiated contacts are enforcement-related (i.e., traffic stop, street stop, arrest) and those that are resident-initiated often involve a negative or troubling situation (i.e., reporting a crime, emergency, or traffic incident) ([Tapp and Davis 2022](#)).

Furthermore, survey findings from over 100 Philadelphia officers indicate strong support for the core principles of COP foot patrols. Officers overwhelmingly endorsed working with citizens to solve problems in their beat (i.e., patrol area), prioritizing community relationships, and engaging in frequent informal contacts, which are all hallmarks of the foot patrol modality ([Ratcliffe et al. 2012](#)). More specifically, officers also tend to agree that foot and bike patrols are optimal for community policing goals ([Caldwell 2016](#); [Haberman and Stiver 2020](#); [Mugari and Thabana 2018](#)). For example, in a study by [Haberman and Stiver \(2020\)](#), 85% of officers indicated that foot patrols would improve police-community relations. One officer even stated, "I think that's how you get to know people. ... They'll wave at you driving in the car, but if you're walking, they're more likely to approach you and have a conversation with you" ([Haberman and Stiver 2020](#), p. 926). Many officers also state that bike patrols are highly enjoyable and increase morale ([Caldwell 2016](#); [Office of Public Safety n.d.](#)). Furthermore, compared with patrol vehicles, bicycles are much more affordable and can enable faster response times in urban areas ([Mroz 2001](#)). Lastly, although there are myriad ways to conceptualize community policing in practice, foot and bike patrols are more common than many others ([Chappell 2009](#); [Gill et al. 2014](#); [Skogan and Frydl 2004](#); [U.S. Department of Justice 2019](#)).

The combination of evidence supporting the use of foot and bike patrols and their prevalence in the field indicates that these tactics may require less friction, in terms of adoption likelihood and acquiring necessary resources, than other tactics that require newfound support and buy-in. Furthermore, other tactics, such as structured community policing events, have been criticized for their inconsistency and for the likelihood that those who would most benefit from positive interactions with the police would not participate ([Skogan 2008](#); [Sloan 2018](#); [Weissman 2017](#)). Conversely, foot and bike patrols allow officers to meet the public in their own communities, thereby minimizing selection effects and making attendance regulation mostly nonessential ([Greene 1987](#); [Reisig 2007](#)).

3. Theme 1: Define Expectations

3.1. Community Willingness and Communication

As [Santos and Santos \(2024\)](#) explain, police agencies must first gauge the community's willingness to adopt a strategy, such as foot or bike patrols. Doing so is crucial because the success of community policing often hinges on the community's willingness to engage or collaborate ([Peyton et al. 2019](#); [Police Executive Research Forum 2004](#); [Skogan and Hartnett 1997](#)). This approach serves both the police and the community and aligns with prior COP research recommendations ([Schaap 2021](#); [Yilmaz 2013](#)) by enabling the police and community to determine whether the strategy is appropriate for the community and worth the effort. Moreover, to ensure that foot or bike patrols are perceived positively, the community should be fully aware of the agency's intentions before implementation begins ([Ratcliffe et al. 2011](#); [Santos and Santos 2024](#)). Although past research has shown that a greater police presence, in a community policing context, typically produces favorable outcomes ([Bolaji and Metcalfe 2024](#); [Kahn et al. 2019](#); [Yesberg et al. 2023](#)), consulting the

community on strategy formulation may encourage them to participate and make them aware that the police will not be there for enforcement purposes.

Community surveys are useful for garnering community approval (Ratcliffe et al. 2011). Community–police meetings may also be useful for discussing if or how to operationalize foot and bike patrols (Carter et al. 2023; Mangai et al. 2024). Mangai et al. (2024) utilized forums to engage community leaders and community members with the police. Furthermore, Carter et al. (2023) state that these meetings should aim to remove barriers between the police and the community and incorporate communication. Lastly, dialog specifically between police agency leadership and the public is helpful for analyzing the willingness of the public to engage in community policing or address broader issues (Santos 2019; Santos and Santos 2024).

There are several feasible ways to gauge community willingness to engage with the police. First, police executives should contact community leaders to see if the approach would be supported by the community. If so, leaders should aim to engage the community in a broader conversation about expectations and local problems (President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing 2015). Community–police forums may be helpful for discussing pertinent criteria for foot and bike patrols (Carter et al. 2023; Mangai et al. 2024).

3.2. Explain the Location and Goals of the Patrols

A large body of place-based literature supports focusing proactive efforts on a specific area, as it consistently shows that crime is highly concentrated (Favarin 2018; Gill et al. 2017; Haberman et al. 2017; Hibdon et al. 2017; Schnell et al. 2017; Weisburd 2015). Accordingly, foot patrols often yield the greatest results in areas with tightly defined, high-crime zones (Ariel et al. 2016; Bland et al. 2021; Haberman and Stiver 2019; Novak et al. 2016; Piza and O’Hara 2014), as unfocused or less clearly bounded patrol areas reduce officers’ capacity to sustain effective coverage (Ratcliffe and Sorg 2017). Therefore, foot and bike patrols should be conducted in these zones, which should be identified by analyzing crime and victimization data (Santos and Santos 2024). It should be clear to all staff exactly where the patrols should be conducted.

One of the major reasons for conducting community policing is to do more than merely react to crime and enforce the law. Therefore, agency leaders must explain that the patrols are for crime prevention and community partnership purposes (Ratcliffe and Sorg 2017; Santos and Santos 2024). To accomplish these goals, staff should be instructed on problem identification, neighborhood-specific talking points, and community partnerships. Furthermore, because the success of community policing depends on organizational buy-in and adoption, the respective duties of all ranks should be outlined to minimize confusion or ambiguity (Santos and Santos 2024).

3.3. Procedural Justice and Transparency

Officers’ behavior is integral to facilitating meaningful community partnerships and collaboration. One framework that guides officers’ conduct in such interactions is procedural justice. Procedural justice, as proposed by Tyler (1990), emphasizes the extent to which individuals feel that police act fairly, treat them with dignity and respect, and make transparent decisions (Tyler and Meares 2019). Citizens’ perceptions of these qualities are critical in shaping their evaluations of police behavior as fair and legitimate (Jonathan-Zamir et al. 2015). Perceived legitimacy directly impacts cooperation with law enforcement, respect for officers, and compliance with the law (Jackson et al. 2012; Jonathan-Zamir et al. 2015; Sunshine and Tyler 2003; Tyler and Meares 2019). Accordingly, integrating procedural justice principles into foot patrol strategies is particularly important.

Foot and bike patrols provide unique opportunities for officers to interact with community members in an informal and non-enforcement setting. Because these encounters are visible, frequent, and often discretionary, they serve as central moments in shaping perceptions of procedural justice. Foot patrols increase officer visibility and create more opportunities for casual conversations and problem-solving (Gill et al. 2014; Haberman and Stiver 2020). Such interactions are exactly where fairness, respect, and voice are most salient. Consistent use of procedural justice principles can strengthen community trust (Murphy et al. 2014; O'Brien and Tyler 2019), reduce fear of crime (Barkworth and Murphy 2016; Liu and Wu 2025), and improve perceptions of police satisfaction (Hinds and Murphy 2007; Rosenbaum et al. 2015). This underscores the importance of foot patrols as a setting where officers can translate procedural justice into routine actions and interactions that shape community relations.

The inherently high-contact nature of foot and bike patrols means that officers are more approachable and more likely to engage in interpersonal communication than officers in vehicles (Menton 2008; Simpson 2017; Sytsma and Piza 2018). These interactions directly affect public perceptions of procedural fairness and legitimacy. When officers employ procedural justice principles during foot and bike patrols, these encounters can enhance perceptions of safety, reduce fear of crime, strengthen community–police relationships, increase cooperation and information sharing, and contribute to more sustainable proactive policing strategies.

Foot and bike patrols offer multiple touchpoints where officers can operationalize procedural justice. Suggested behaviors include greeting residents, business owners, and youth by name, when possible, to build familiarity (Cordner 2010), avoiding dismissive language (Barkworth and Murphy 2016), asking about or acknowledging concerns and responding (Jonathan-Zamir et al. 2015; Skogan 2019), and demonstrating awareness and sensitivity to community norms as they directly impact resident attitudes (Antrobus et al. 2015). Officers can further strengthen procedural justice encounters by following up on issues previously raised by community members to support problem-solving (Gill et al. 2014), explaining the rationale behind decisions to reinforce transparency (Tyler and Meares 2019), applying rules consistently to ensure neutrality (Tyler and Meares 2019), maintaining continuity and showing care by walking routes consistently and checking back with individuals who previously expressed concerns (Cowell and Kringen 2016), and signaling through words and actions that their presence intended to support the community rather than simply enforce or control to enhance legitimacy and cooperation (Peyton et al. 2019).

An innovative approach to increase transparency is to simply use what Dobson et al. (2025) refer to as a “transparency statement,” which has been shown to increase community members’ trust in officers. These statements acknowledge that the officer is not there for enforcement or investigative purposes. For example, rather than simply asking to speak with an individual, an officer would initiate the conversation by stating that they were “walking around trying to get to know the community.” Such findings were also effective across diverse groups (Dobson et al. 2025).

A practical challenge for agencies seeking to institutionalize engagement-oriented patrol is that the core activities that build trust, such as respectful treatment and responsiveness, are not easily captured through traditional productivity measures. One approach to evaluating community feedback is through surveys, with London’s oversight model illustrating this strategy through continuous public attitude surveys that track trust, confidence, and related experiences (Gilbert and Brown 2025). When data collection is feasible, agencies can also draw on existing instruments rather than developing tools from scratch, including the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (2025) community survey on

public safety and law enforcement, as well as the community satisfaction survey provided by Ward et al. (2007).

When surveys are not practical, engagement can still be monitored and evaluated through community meetings (Duffee et al. 2006) to gauge the attitudes and experiences of residents. Furthermore, officer activity during the foot and bike patrols can be captured through standardized documentation beyond enforcement, such as the purpose of contacts, problem identification, and follow-ups (Kringen et al. 2018; Santos and Santos 2024). These approaches inform whether engagement is occurring and whether it is experienced as procedurally just and confidence-building, while also supporting identification of which practices are most effective.

3.4. Foot and Bike Patrol Continuity

For officers to achieve the goals of community policing, they must be able to adequately and consistently connect with their community while also developing familiarity with their designated patrol area (Cowell and Kringen 2016; Reisig 2007; Skogan and Hartnett 1997). This integration is vital because officers will not be able to effectively identify, stay up to date on, or address issues, much less develop partnerships with the community, if they cannot focus their efforts (Reisig 2007; Signori et al. 2023). In a study by Willis (2013), a sergeant assigned to the community policing unit reinforced this point by stating, “If I am deploying people out differently each day, there is no tie-in and development of relationships within the community, and ownership and even accountability to some degree” (p. 249).

The implications of beat assignment continuity are beneficial for foot and bike patrols in several ways. First, it allows officers to gain a more nuanced understanding of their beat and its residents (Cowell and Kringen 2016; Kane 2000). Second, police are better able to interact with the community when they are outside of their cars, on regular foot or bike patrols (Green et al. 2018; Sytsma and Piza 2018; Menton 2008). Lastly, continuity is absolutely necessary for building trust and establishing systematic, consistent processes for cooperation. Therefore, because community members have the same embedded community police officer, they may be more inclined to collaborate with them, as they trust them more, know them as a resource, and know where to find them (i.e., on their regular foot patrol beat) (Signori et al. 2023). Evidence also shows that when officers are assigned to a specific beat, they can develop extensive knowledge of their designated area (Wood et al. 2014) and are more likely to identify local problems (Kringen et al. 2018), which can help them respond to community issues and build positive community relations (Cowell and Kringen 2016; Ratcliffe and Sorg 2017; Reisig 2007; Trojanowicz 1983). Therefore, where possible, agencies should provide officers with ample time to become familiar with their beat or community and remain assigned to it.

In practice, agencies must ensure that officers are consistently assigned to the same beat. In terms of beat selection, this feat should be inherent considering that patrols are most effective in tightly defined, high-crime areas (Novak et al. 2016; Piza and O'Hara 2014). Furthermore, consistent assignments should be given at each level of the agency and should be defined by crime and victimization data (Santos and Santos 2024).

To help accomplish community policing continuity, police agencies should seek to (1) give community policing the professional status that it deserves, rather than making it seem like an inferior job assignment, (2) select someone for foot patrols that is motivated, fit, and is willing to become integrated in the community, and (3) develop more opportunities to entice officers to stay within their respective beats, so that they can attain advanced knowledge of the inner-workings of their local area (Mroz 2001; Signori et al. 2023).

4. Theme 2: Engage Leaders

One of the primary concerns among police agencies regarding foot patrols and community policing is that they prevent officers from responding to calls for service (Haberman and Stiver 2020; Willis 2013). This concern highlights an important organizational reality: community policing activities often compete with traditional performance demands, and without supervisory leadership, officers may default toward reactive responsibilities rather than proactive engagement. This emphasizes the need for first-line supervisors to also engage in community policing foot patrols, as they have greater autonomy to respond to community policing issues (Willis 2013) and are less inundated with calls for service (Santos and Santos 2024).

First-line supervisors are also key for foot and bike patrols because they are largely responsible for and instrumental in ensuring the implementation works as intended (Cronin et al. 2017; Engel 2000; Santos 2019; U.S. Department of Justice 2019). Therefore, regardless of how thorough a community engagement plan may be, without a dedicated, thorough first-line supervisor overseeing community policing, the actual practice may be substandard (Engel 2000; U.S. Department of Justice 2019). Supervisors establish the boundaries of acceptable practice (Signori et al. 2023), and officers consistently report that they are more likely to prioritize certain practices when their sergeants encourage and value those behaviors (Cronin et al. 2017; Engel 2002; Engel 2000). Leadership visibility also helps maintain internal program momentum. When officers observe leadership investing time in community policing, they are likely to view foot and bike patrols as legitimate duties rather than temporary or symbolic assignments (Signori et al. 2023). Furthermore, to secure department buy-in and support and to make community engagement an agency-wide mission, it must be carried out by higher-ranking personnel (Santos and Santos 2024; U.S. Department of Justice 2019).

Community members may also perceive foot and bike patrols as a serious and supported initiative when supervisors and higher-ranking personnel are visibly present and dedicating attention and resources (Santos and Santos 2024; Sloan 2018). As a result of integrating higher-ranking personnel, the community members may see the agency's efforts as more sincere, engagement may be more successful, and it may help ensure the success of the foot patrol program in the future (Santos and Santos 2024; Sloan 2018).

Beyond visibility, effective leadership in foot and bike patrol initiatives also requires supervisory capacity and skill development (Signori et al. 2023). Command staff must be equipped to coach officers in community engagement, problem-solving, and procedural justice, rather than relying solely on enforcement metrics (Santos 2019). Leadership engagement should be explicitly tied to organizational objectives such as improving community trust, confidence, and legitimacy. As officer receptivity to community policing varies, supervisors play a critical role in addressing resistance and sustaining engagement (Cronin et al. 2017; Engel 2000; Santos and Santos 2024; Signori et al. 2023). Clear, rank-specific responsibilities further support implementation, with command staff setting priorities, first-line supervisors translating the priorities into expectations, and officers operationalizing engagement on the street (Ratcliffe and Sorg 2017; Santos 2019). Supervisory performance can be evaluated through documented activity, officer feedback, and community indicators of confidence or satisfaction. Embedding these expectations into supervisory review processes reinforces that proactive engagement is a core organizational outcome where leadership is accountable.

Supervisors should make scheduled appearances in the foot or bike patrol areas (Santos and Santos 2024). These appearances allow sergeants to model desired behaviors and reinforce expectations in real time (Cronin et al. 2017; Engel 2000; U.S. Department of Justice 2019). Furthermore, communication will help agency leaders develop a deeper understand-

ing of local problems; therefore, structured and consistent communication systems should be established. Finally, agency leadership must adopt community-policing goals and consistently emphasize their importance during interactions, briefings, official meetings, and roll calls (Santos and Santos 2020, 2024). These measures will ensure that organizational intent is translated into consistent practice and increase agency-level support.

5. Theme 3: Establish Accountability

5.1. Increasing Community Engagement

Compared with other strategies, foot and bike patrols may increase community engagement simply because of their location and consistency (Cowell and Kringen 2016). For example, events such as “Coffee with a Cop” are unlikely to attract those most disengaged from the police, require community members to attend, and require the community to be aware of each event’s date, time, and location (Sloan 2018; Weissman 2017). Foot and bike patrols eliminate these factors by meeting people in their own neighborhoods, where crime problems, familiar to community members, occur. Furthermore, immersing officers and leadership in communities through consistent patrols will ensure that residents know when and where to locate them (Signori et al. 2023). Lastly, the longevity of foot and bike patrols signals to community members that the agency cares and is not doing this solely as a public relations ploy. As a result, communities may perceive the agency’s efforts as more sincere and engage more often with the police. From an implementation standpoint, agencies can reinforce this effect by assigning consistent patrol windows and publicly communicating when and where foot and bike patrols will occur, allowing residents to anticipate and initiate engagement (Santos and Santos 2024; Signori et al. 2023).

One method that should accompany foot and bike patrols is to utilize a community representative, who can either serve in a formal or informal role, to increase engagement (Sloan 2018). These representatives can speak about the broader community’s ideals or goals (Putnam 2000) but can also serve as a conduit for open dialog (Carter et al. 2023; Sloan 2018). The past literature indicates that certain community officials, representatives, or liaisons are instrumental in mobilizing the community, even in low-socioeconomic-status communities (Carter et al. 2017; Fader 2024; Pino 2001; Putnam 2000; Schwartz 2008; Yogev 2022). Furthermore, representatives, in various roles, often serve as a vehicle for community-based cooperation with the police (Putnam 2000). These actors are often town or city council members (Santos 2019), school district officials (U.S. Department of Justice 2019), faith leaders (Putnam 2000; U.S. Department of Justice 2019; Yogev 2022), or senior community members (Carter et al. 2017; Schwartz 2008).

Santos (2019) emphasizes that it is critical to understand these actors’ roles and influence within the community and to work together to achieve community policing goals. Both Pino (2001) and Putnam (2000) affirm this point, noting that the success of community policing may partly result from community leaders’ ability to foster collective efficacy. However, the actors can vary across communities, and their usefulness will depend on each community’s level of endorsement.

Police leaders should regularly attend meetings pertaining to the community, become familiar with community representatives and stakeholders, and draw on representatives for support and engagement (Putnam 2000; Santos 2019; Santos and Santos 2024).

Simply conducting foot or bike patrols, compared to other strategies, may increase community–police engagement and buy-in. Those selected for foot and bike patrols should be highly motivated to connect with the community, reflect the agency’s mission in their demeanor and work ethic, and maintain their fitness (Mroz 2001; Ratcliffe and Sorg 2017; Signori et al. 2023). Furthermore, officers who are interested in improving their health,

engaging with youth, and engaging in more problem-solving or positive interactions would likely be more willing to adopt and remain consistent with their patrol practices.

5.2. Accountability and Buy-In

It is important to note that simply allowing officers to conduct foot and bike patrols may increase their motivation and buy-in for community policing (Cowell and Kringen 2016; Greene 1987). For instance, bike patrols provide officers with the opportunity to get out of their vehicles, increase their overall fitness (Caldwell 2016; Lehouillier et al. 2021), and can increase morale (Office of Public Safety n.d.). Foot and bike patrols also create more opportunities for positive, non-enforcement interactions with the public (Menton 2008; Piza 2018; Sytsma and Piza 2018). Caldwell (2016) notes that officers are repeatedly flagged down by community members who ask questions and make conversation. In turn, these factors may make officers feel more appreciated or wanted by the community, further increasing their buy-in. Additionally, because a lack of career development opportunities is one of the primary drivers of police attrition (Davies et al. 2024), providing officers with opportunities to expand their duties and proactively engage may help foster organizational- and career-level buy-in. Lastly, as Weissman (2017) notes, community policing events are less optimal than efforts that meet the community in their own neighborhood. Thus, foot and bike patrols ensure officer and community engagement, are more consistent, and can be conducted by any level of the agency (Greene 1987).

Police agencies frequently adopt the language of community policing without building internal accountability structures to support it, resulting in weak or symbolic implementation of foot and bicycle patrols (Santos 2019; U.S. Department of Justice 2019). Agency leaders, especially first-line supervisors, play a central role in shaping officer behavior, yet they often lack COP-specific performance metrics or practical tools to monitor engagement, making community-oriented foot and bike patrols appear optional or secondary to traditional, enforcement-focused responsibilities (Santos 2019; Santos and Santos 2024).

When foot patrol activity is not tracked or reinforced, officers receive mixed signals about its importance, leading them to prioritize measurable outputs, such as calls for service, vehicle patrol, or investigative stops, over proactive and relational engagement (Sytsma and Piza 2018; U.S. Department of Justice 2019). This misalignment between stated organizational goals and supervisory practice is one of the most documented reasons community policing strategies struggle to take hold within line-level operations (Santos and Santos 2024; U.S. Department of Justice 2019). In practice, agencies can reduce this ambiguity by clearly defining what constitutes meaningful engagement and incorporating simple documentation or supervisory check-ins that reinforce these expectations (Santos and Santos 2020). For example, brief roll-call discussions, short narrative activity logs, or supervisory walkthroughs can be utilized to reinforce engagement expectations without adding substantial administrative burden.

A lack of structured accountability also creates substantial ambiguity for officers, reducing buy-in and contributing to wide variation in how these patrols are executed (Sytsma and Piza 2018; Wood et al. 2014). Officers assigned to foot or bike units often revert to reactive patterns, such as responding to calls or engaging primarily in enforcement, when supervisors do not consistently monitor proactive activity or reinforce expectations for community engagement (Santos 2019; Sytsma and Piza 2018). Wood et al. (2014) similarly observed that officers conducting foot patrol in Philadelphia lacked operational clarity about whether to prioritize visibility, relationship-building, crime prevention, or problem-solving, which led officers to improvise their own priorities in ways that diverged from the intended program model.

Research further shows that when officers are uncertain about what “counts” as effective foot patrol, whether informal contacts, trust-building interactions, or investigative tasks, they default to familiar, enforcement-oriented behaviors that are more easily justified to supervisors (Bolaji and Metcalfe 2024; Sytsma and Piza 2018). This ambiguity is a direct consequence of accountability systems that fail to differentiate meaningful engagement from mere presence (Santos and Santos 2024; U.S. Department of Justice 2019). Conversely, when agencies clearly articulate what they perceive “counts” as an effective foot or bike patrol, such as relationship-building, follow-up conversations, or problem identification, officers report greater clarity, confidence, and willingness to engage proactively.

Evidence from officer interviews further underscores the necessity for accountability and buy-in to sustain these patrol programs long-term. Haberman and Stiver (2020) found that officers were generally supportive of foot patrols in principle but expressed skepticism about their long-term viability in the absence of strong supervisory engagement, clear expectations, and organizational follow-through. Officers described previous foot-patrol initiatives as short-lived and inconsistently monitored, noting that leadership enthusiasm often waned quickly, an experience that reduced their trust in new community-policing efforts and diminished their willingness to invest emotionally or professionally (Haberman and Stiver 2020; Wood et al. 2014).

Such “implementation fatigue” leads officers to perceive foot patrol as symbolic rather than substantive, particularly when the organization provides no feedback, reinforcement, or recognition for engagement-oriented activities (Haberman and Stiver 2020; Santos 2019). When officers believe a program is temporary, inconsistently supported, or unmeasured, fidelity to the intended model erodes as officers return to activities that align more clearly with organizational expectations (Santos and Santos 2024; Sytsma and Piza 2018). Sustaining even modest feedback and recognition mechanisms, such as supervisor acknowledgement or discussion of engagement outcomes, can help counter implementation fatigue and reinforce long-term commitment to foot and bike patrols (Santos 2019).

The broader community-policing literature demonstrates that accountability and officer buy-in are also affected by public perceptions of foot patrols and ultimately dictate their effectiveness. Residents respond most positively to officers who demonstrate procedural justice and consistent presence, yet these behaviors depend on whether agencies reinforce and monitor them internally (Lord et al. 2009; Reisig 2007). Koper et al. (2022) found that community attitudes varied widely depending on the activities officers performed: engagement-oriented actions improved trust, while enforcement-heavy or inconsistent presence generated skepticism and reduced perceived legitimacy (Koper et al. 2022).

Likewise, Bolaji and Metcalfe (2024) showed that involuntary or procedural stop-based encounters erode trust, highlighting the need for accountability systems that reinforce voluntary, relational contact as the primary mode of foot patrol (Bolaji and Metcalfe 2024). When agencies fail to maintain consistent expectations or provide supervisory reinforcement, communities quickly perceive foot patrols as superficial or inconsistent, which undermines the very legitimacy benefits such patrols are designed to deliver (Reisig 2007; U.S. Department of Justice 2019). Taken together, these mechanisms communicate that proactive community engagement is not discretionary, but a supported and reinforced aspect of routine police work; an approach shown to increase officer engagement and long-term, low-cost program sustainability.

Agencies should develop explicit, rank-specific expectations that outline what community engagement should look like for officers, sergeants, and command staff (President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing 2015; U.S. Department of Justice 2019). These expectations should be simple, measurable, and aligned with broader organizational goals so that personnel understand that proactive engagement is an essential duty rather than a symbolic

task (Santos and Santos 2024). To support these expectations, thorough documentation procedures should be established for foot and bike patrol interactions.

Mechanisms for documentation and accountability do not require immense complexity to be effective. Agencies can begin by tracking whether patrol plans, schedules, and engagement expectations have been clearly communicated (Santos 2019; Santos and Santos 2024). Next, agency leadership must ensure that officers have completed engagement-focused training (Santos and Santos 2024). Furthermore, during implementation, supervisors should conduct brief, iterative evaluations to determine whether scheduled patrols are proceeding as planned (U.S. Department of Justice 2019). Measurable outcomes and outputs should also be determined (Santos and Santos 2024). For example, creating a designated “community walk” call type and requiring photographic documentation of foot or bike patrols can support accountability and verify consistent implementation (Santos and Santos 2024). Furthermore, body-worn camera footage can be used to assess the quality of officer-community interactions and engagement, while also serving as a tool for training and supervisory feedback (Police Executive Research Forum 2018; President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing 2015; Slothower et al. 2015).

Physical presence and supervision in the patrol areas are also critical mechanisms. To ensure that foot and bike patrols are conducted with fidelity, agencies should implement routine supervisory oversight, such as weekly check-ins and field observations (Santos and Santos 2020, 2024). These measures can enhance officer clarity and confidence, strengthen buy-in to proactive engagement, and promote consistent implementation of foot and bike patrols across shifts and beats. Finally, evaluation mechanisms that track both frequency of interactions and community outcomes (i.e., problem identification or community feedback) should be employed (President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing 2015; U.S. Department of Justice 2019). Pre-established survey instruments are also highly useful for measuring community outcomes and perceptions before and after implementation (Office of Community Oriented Policing Services 2025; Ward et al. 2007). Together, these mechanisms produce the necessary structure for success.

6. Discussion

This review sought to operationalize community-oriented policing by focusing on key implementation features of an actionable strategy: foot and bike patrols. Although community policing has long been promoted as a mechanism for enhancing trust, fostering collaboration, and addressing local problems, agencies struggle with how to operationalize it in practice (Chappell 2009; Mastrofski et al. 2007; Seagrave 1996; Terpstra 2009). The literature shows inconsistencies in how community policing is defined and carried out, often resulting in fragmented efforts rather than sustained engagement. By drawing on Santos and Santos’ (2024) framework for operationalizing proactive community engagement and synthesizing empirical evidence, this paper offers a clearer framework for agencies seeking to implement foot and bike patrols in a deliberate and evidence-informed manner.

A central insight from this review is that proactive engagement is most effective when it reflects community-defined needs rather than police-defined assumptions. Research demonstrates that engagement efforts succeed when residents experience officers as accessible, collaborative, and willing to work with them to identify and solve problems (Bolaji and Metcalfe 2024; Lord et al. 2009; Santos and Santos 2024). Foot and bike patrols offer a natural platform for these types of interactions because they allow officers to be present in the daily rhythms of neighborhood life. However, agencies must avoid treating engagement as an informal or optional activity. It requires clear expectations, time allocation, and organizational reinforcement to ensure that officers approach residents consistently and in ways that reflect the community’s priorities (Santos 2019; U.S. Department of Justice 2019).

When engagement is supported structurally through their agency, officers are more likely to view it as legitimate police work rather than a symbolic or secondary task.

Also, a key takeaway from this review is that foot and bike patrols provide an especially strong mechanism for enacting the core principles of community policing. Their visibility and mobility enable officers to engage in everyday, informal encounters that build familiarity and legitimacy, which is rarely facilitated by vehicle patrols or formal events (Menton 2008; Sytsma and Piza 2018; Weissman 2017). However, these benefits are not inherent to foot and bike patrols; rather, they emerge when officers and agencies approach the strategy intentionally, with structure and clear behavioral standards.

Together, the strategies identified across the three themes demonstrate that successful foot and bike patrol programs depend not on the mere presence of officers in a neighborhood, but on the intentional alignment of officer behaviors, leadership involvement, and organizational goals. The literature consistently shows that procedural justice, transparency, continuity, proactive engagement, and supervisory involvement operate as mutually reinforcing components rather than isolated techniques (Dobson et al. 2025; Kringen et al. 2018; Reisig 2007; Santos and Santos 2024; Signori et al. 2023; Tyler and Meares 2019). When officers engage residents respectfully and consistently, communities perceive police presence as legitimate and collaborative rather than intrusive. Transparency further strengthens these interactions by helping residents understand police activities, decision-making, and constraints, which in turn reduces uncertainty and can improve feelings of trust (Dobson et al. 2025). Yet both procedural justice and transparency depend on continuity, meaning that without a consistent presence, the interactions that build familiarity, reduce social distance, and support voluntary cooperation cannot occur (Kringen et al. 2018).

The central role of supervision further ties these strategies together by shaping whether officers can realistically carry out community-oriented work. Supervisors influence priorities, clarify expectations, and model the behaviors that officers are asked to perform (Santos 2019; Santos and Santos 2024). Agencies that rely solely on line-level enthusiasm often struggle with uneven implementation and inconsistent community experiences, while those that involve supervisors and command staff in foot and bike patrol activities signal organizational seriousness and sustain momentum over time (Cronin et al. 2017; U.S. Department of Justice 2019). This finding aligns with long-standing COP research emphasizing that programs falter without organizational transformation, accountability mechanisms, and leadership participation (Skogan and Frydl 2004; U.S. Department of Justice 2019). Supervisory involvement thus serves as the connective tissue that translates organizational philosophy into daily practice.

Ultimately, this application of Santos and Santos' (2024) framework highlights that the success of foot and bike patrols rests on the degree to which agencies deliberately structure the conditions for effective community policing. Agencies that deploy officers without clear expectations, transparent communication, continuity of presence, or supervisory reinforcement are likely to see limited or inconsistent effects, leading to program failures. However, agencies that build these elements into their operational framework are better positioned to achieve the outcomes long associated with community policing, including improved legitimacy, stronger relationships, reduced disorder, and greater shared responsibility for public safety. Foot and bike patrols are therefore most effective not only as visibility tools but also as structured platforms for procedural, transparent, and continuous engagement, supported at every level within the organization.

7. Conclusions

Foot and bike patrols offer a practical and widely accessible means of operationalizing community-oriented policing, but their effectiveness depends on intentional implementa-

tion rather than simple deployment. This review outlined key strategies under Santos and Santos' (2024) three themes that, together, create the conditions for meaningful community engagement. When these elements are aligned, foot and bike patrols can serve as more than visibility tools; they can become a comprehensive community policing effort that supports engagement, deployment, shared responsibility, and effective oversight. Importantly, accountability structures that clarify expectations and reinforce engagement play a central role in sustaining officer buy-in and ensuring that foot and bike patrols function as intended rather than symbolic approaches to community policing.

The identified strategies indicate that successful community policing requires both officer-level behavioral shifts and organizational-level support. Foot and bike patrols alone cannot fulfill all principles of community policing, but when carried out with clear expectations, adequate structure, and strong leadership, they provide a foundation for long-term collaboration and effective problem-solving between agencies and the communities they serve. Agencies that invest in these implementation components are better positioned to realize the substantive benefits of community-oriented policing in practice, particularly by increasing officer engagement, program consistency, and long-term sustainability.

This article is a translational synthesis aimed toward operationalization rather than a systematic review or empirical evaluation. As such, the paper does not use a search protocol or exhaustive exploration of the literature. We also recognize that foot and bike patrol programs can vary substantially across agencies in dosage, geography, supervision, and more, which limits the extent to which conclusion can be generalized across settings. Furthermore, inconsistencies in the operationalization of key outcomes (e.g., trust, legitimacy) are present throughout the literature; thus, conclusions may be sensitive to measurement choices. Despite these limitations, this article makes a meaningful contribution by operationalizing foot and bike patrols, offering practical direction on how these strategies can be implemented to support meaningful community engagement.

More broadly, this review highlights a persistent challenge in contemporary policing characterized by the disconnect between a growing evidence base and agencies' ability to translate that evidence into consistent and effective practice. The findings synthesized here demonstrate that the effectiveness of many policing approaches depends heavily on the organizational and structural conditions under which they are implemented. Advancing the policing evidence base, therefore, requires greater emphasis on research that addresses not only what works, but how strategies can be operationalized, adapted, and sustained in real-world policing.

8. Future Directions

Overall, future community policing practice should be accountable, actionable, and evidence-based. Specifically, the focus should be on strengthening the consistency and structure of foot and bike patrols. Agencies often endorse community policing but lack clear expectations and strategies for operationalizing it (Chappell 2009; Lum et al. 2020; Marcou 2025; Mastrofski et al. 2007; Terpstra 2009). By applying the key tips outlined in this guide, agencies should maintain strategic implementation practices to ensure that community policing is carried out effectively and as intended.

Future research should continue building a clearer understanding of implementation fidelity in community policing. Although evidence supports the value of procedural justice, transparency, continuity, community engagement, and the role of supervisors in community policing, far fewer studies examine how consistently these components are implemented within foot or bike patrol programs. Also, integrating key takeaways for practitioners may help bridge the practical-knowledge gap not only in what to do, but also in how to do it effectively.

Lastly, research should also further examine how neighborhood context shapes the effectiveness of foot and bike patrol strategies. Specifically, research comparing COP strategies throughout different types of communities and agencies can help promote more tailored, context-specific solutions.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

COP Community-oriented policing

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