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Compstat in the Granger Police Department: A First-Year Appraisal

Report to the Granger Police Department

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The John F. Finn Institute for Public Safety, Inc., is an independent, not-for-profit and non-partisan corporation, whose work is dedicated to the development of criminal justice strategies, programs, and practices that are effective, lawful, and procedurally fair, through the application of social science findings and methods. The Institute conducts social research on matters of public safety and security – crime, public disorder, and the management of criminal justice agencies and partnerships – in collaboration with municipal, county, state, and federal criminal justice agencies, and for their direct benefit. The findings of the Institute’s research are also disseminated through other media to criminal justice professionals, academicians, elected public officials, and other interested parties, so that those findings may contribute to a broader body of knowledge about criminal justice and to the practical application of those findings in other settings.

The Finn Institute was established in 2007, building on a set of collaborative projects and relationships with criminal justice agencies dating to 1998. The first of those projects, for which we partnered with the Albany Police Department (APD), was initiated by John Finn, who was at that time the sergeant who commanded the APD’s Juvenile Unit. Later promoted to lieutenant and assigned to the department’s Administrative Services Bureau, he spearheaded efforts to implement problem-oriented policing, and to develop an institutional capability for analysis that would support problem-solving. The APD’s capacity for applying social science methods and results thereupon expanded exponentially, based on Lt. Finn’s appreciation for the value of research, his keen aptitude for analysis, and his vision of policing, which entailed the formulation of proactive, data-driven, and – as needed – unconventional strategies to address problems of public safety. Lt. Finn was fatally shot in the line of duty in 2003. The Institute that bears his name honors his life and career by fostering the more effective use of research and analysis within criminal justice agencies, just as Lt. Finn did in the APD.

Introduction

Compstat is an administrative innovation introduced as part of the “reengineering” of the New York City Police Department wrought by Commissioner William Bratton, in the mid-1990s.¹ Commissioner Bratton sought to make the commanders of NYPD’s seventy-five precincts the engines of crime reduction initiatives. He gave precinct commanders more authority to develop operational plans and to allocate their resources accordingly, and through Compstat, they were held accountable for using their authority to achieve crime-reduction results. Compstat originated in meetings with borough and precinct commanders at which their performance could be assessed, justified, and critiqued, with information on that performance available to all present; the information about crime, initially available in a book of weekly crime totals, became increasingly detailed and rich, so that what started as “crime meetings” evolved into “computer-statistics” meetings.²

NYPD’s Compstat was – correctly or not – credited with the dramatic decline in New York City’s crime rate through the latter half of the 1990s, and consequently it has been widely emulated by police agencies across the U.S. and across the world. In 1996, Compstat was recognized with an “Innovations in American Government” award by the Ford Foundation and Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government. By 2000, one third of the 515 American police agencies with 100 or more sworn personnel had adopted a Compstat-like program, and an additional one quarter were planning such a program.³ Compstat has also been adopted by other types of public agencies, and by city mayors and even state governors. Compstat *can* be an organizational mechanism that serves to, first, direct attention to important police outcomes – crime, disorder, fear of crime, quality of life, citizen satisfaction – and second, to stimulate the formulation and implementation of tactical and strategic operations that are directed toward those outcomes.⁴ But recent research on Compstat shows that the replication of Compstat in other agencies has not always adhered to the same principles, and has encountered several problems.⁵

The Granger Police Department adopted Compstat in 2006, after preparatory work that began in 2005. In contrast with the NYPD, a bureaucracy of gargantuan proportions, and New York City, a city of more than seven million people, the Granger PD – like the more typical American police agency – is a small enough organization that its employees can all be acquainted with one another, serving a city that is smaller in population than one of NYPD’s precincts. Granger’s patrol commanders have temporal, not geographic responsibility. Unit commanders cannot be readily replaced based on their failures to meet the department’s expectation, in contrast with NYPD, where two thirds of the precinct commanders were replaced in the first year of Commissioner Bratton’s administration. GPD’s information system was, in 2006, a source of limited data on crime, and while improvements have been made, it suffers from significant shortcomings still. In view of these and other differences, we would not expect that the details of Compstat operation would be the same in GPD as in NYPD, but rather that Compstat would be adapted to GPD’s organizational structure and environment. Compstat, however, does not come with a user’s guide, complete with directions on how it can be adjusted while remaining faithful to the principles that made it successful in NYPD.

When Compstat was introduced in Granger, it was with the expectation that it would evolve as everyone became more accustomed to the process, as the capacity for analysis expanded, and as the process was modified based on experience. The purpose of this report is to contribute to that evolution. With approximately one year of experience with Compstat, we sought to take stock of how it is working, and how it can be altered to work better. We have attended Granger’s Compstat meetings, worked with the chiefs and with the crime analyst on

the development and format of Compstat, reviewed research on and related to Compstat, and moreover, we interviewed the principal participants, including the chief, the two assistant chiefs, and unit commanders. On that basis, we have identified several issues, and we offer several recommendations.

Issues

We have identified five key issues, as we describe below.

For our discussion of these issues, we think it useful to briefly review the elements of Compstat popularized by NYPD. Commissioner Bratton identified four principles:

- timely, accurate data;
- selection of effective tactics;
- rapid, focused deployment of resources;
- relentless follow-up and assessment.

Many accounts of Compstat hold that it is intended to facilitate problem-solving by police. “Problems” are understood as constellations of related incidents, whose common features – when they occur, where they occur, what kinds of people are involved as victims or perpetrators – may afford the police some leverage, allowing for responses that alter the conditions that give rise to the incidents. Like Compstat, problem-solving is data-driven and outcome oriented.

Structure of Tactical Decision-making

Perhaps the most widely recognized features of NYPD’s Compstat are (1) twice-weekly meetings, with a precinct commander at a podium fielding pointed questions about patterns of crime and the precinct’s efforts to address them, and (2) the maps projected on a large screen that depict those crime patterns in spatial terms. But in fact Compstat is much more, a system of performance measurement that undergirds the Compstat meetings and enables police managers to track important outcomes. As a system of performance measurement, Compstat focuses attention on valued outcomes and provides a means of assessing the success with which police units have produced valuable results by choosing effective tactics and deploying resources.

Decisions about tactics and deployment are, ultimately, the responsibility of unit commanders, and we would expect that this work would be done on a day-to-day and week-to-week basis by captains, sergeants, and others throughout the chain-of-command. These efforts, we presume, would be based on analyses of crime and disorder conditions that are conducted on an ongoing basis.

The Compstat meeting, then, is an occasion:

- for operational commanders to explain what objectives they have pursued, why, and how;
- for chiefs to ensure that commanders have not overlooked crime or disorder problems of significance, and that results are being achieved (i.e., to hold commanders accountable for results); and
- for everyone to share information and ideas.

The Compstat meeting is not the only or even the primary venue for analysis and the formulation of operational plans. We believe that the development of Compstat in Granger has focused too much on the Compstat meetings and too little on the development of structures that would support tactical decision-making and problem-solving. Commissioner Bratton described “four levels of Compstat,” including the empowerment (and “interrogation”) not only of precinct commanders but also, in turn down the chain-of-command, of platoon commanders, field supervisors (sergeants), and officers.⁶ In Granger, only three levels are pertinent, but nevertheless accountability and input into problem-solving must be systematically pushed down the chain-of-command to include sergeants and patrol officers. This would entail more than making Compstat information available to those who do not directly participate in Compstat meetings, but rather making sergeants and officers responsible for crime and disorder problems within the parameters of their assignments.

Expectations

One of the primary virtues of Compstat, we believe, is its potential to fix police attention on the ends of policing – crime reduction, disorder control, the enhancement of quality of life, community satisfaction – and not only on the means – arrests, tickets, and so forth. It is outcomes, and not simple counts of outputs, that should be stressed. If unit commanders are to be held accountable for outcomes, and for mounting good-faith efforts to affect those outcomes in desirable ways, then outputs are important mainly as the by-products of effective tactics.

We gather that these expectations were either not clear or mistaken during the first year of Compstat in Granger, as they were not uniformly understood by Granger’s commanders, some of whom believed that their Compstat-related responsibilities revolved around the commander profiles and the counts therein – either personnel matters (staffing, sick leave) or outputs (arrests, tickets). It appears that it may be necessary to clarify the expectations for commanders’ work, in general, and their participation in Compstat meetings, in particular, emphasizing that the contents of profiles are relevant only insofar as they contribute to the reduction of crime and disorder.

One of the primary drawbacks of Compstat, we believe, is that commanders might reasonably gravitate toward conventional police tactics, which more reliably produce evidence of their efforts, in addressing crime or disorder problems, and away from more innovative approaches whose elements may not be documented in customary police records. This is unfortunate, and while we know of no sure corrective for this structural bias, all of the Compstat participants should be cognizant of and make allowances for it.

Another equally serious drawback of Compstat is that the measurement of outcomes is normally confined to crime, and it thus omits important outcomes that ought to be the objects of police attention, including especially quality of life issues, but also citizen satisfaction with police service, and the compliance of police with law and policy. Some of these deficiencies can be more easily addressed than others. Quality of life conditions can be measured to some degree with calls for service data, but citizen satisfaction can be measured reliably only through surveys, and the procedural propriety of police actions is not measured validly with citizen complaints.

Finally, the 28-day Compstat time horizon, over which crime patterns are most intensively analyzed, may not be optimal. It is better suited to efforts to address short-term spikes in crime than it is to efforts to address longer-term problems, and fortunately, the short-term crime spikes in Granger are not normally so frequent or so pronounced that the monthly

incidence of crime forms patterns that commanders can address. The periodicity of the Compstat meetings need not define the time frame across which commanders and chiefs scan for, analyze, and address crime and disorder problems. Commanders – and Compstat meetings – can and should address problems that are comprised of incidents occurring over a much longer duration; regular (monthly) Compstat meetings would serve to provide the “relentless follow-up” that is so often missing when police agencies practice problem-oriented policing.

Accountability & Resources

Research on Compstat raises but does not answer the question of how – that is, with what rewards and sanctions – commanders should be held accountable. In the early days of Compstat in the NYPD, the stakes for precinct commanders were high: those who performed well could expect to be praised during Compstat meetings and to advance in the NYPD hierarchy, and those who performed unsatisfactorily could expect to be berated and humiliated during Compstat meetings and to lose their commands. Whether such serious consequences are necessary in order to motivate commanders to work conscientiously to meet the expectations that Compstat imposes on them is not clear. In the context of Granger the question is to a large degree academic, inasmuch as the opportunities for advancement are limited, and the risk of losing one’s command is small.

In an agency like the GPD, we would expect that commanders’ professional pride and reputation would be their principal stakes in meeting Compstat demands and expectations. An appearance at a Compstat meeting at which one is demonstrably unaware of crime or disorder patterns, or unable to describe and explain efforts to address those problems, should be an embarrassment, even if the meeting’s moderator does nothing to emphasize these shortcomings. The commanders with whom we spoke told us that the Compstat meetings should be collegial, and not adversarial, and we would concur with that view, so long as collegiality is not construed to mean that a commander’s failure to fulfill his/her responsibilities is overlooked. This is a delicate balance to strike. Commanders should be treated with respect. They should be recognized when they perform well. And they should accept that unsatisfactory performance will not be glossed over, even as it is not made the subject of ridicule.

A related question concerns commanders’ access to the resources necessary to address the crime and disorder problems that they identify. Commanders can be held accountable for results only when they have sufficient resources with which to mount problem-solving initiatives. Compared with other city police departments in the state, Granger is understaffed, and this would surely affect captains’ latitude in devising effective tactics. It certainly puts a premium on their ingenuity, and also on the judicious use of grant-funded overtime. Problem-oriented approaches to crime and disorder may but need not always take conventional forms, relying on police presence and enforcement activity; more innovative (and less costly) responses are sometimes feasible. But it is not sufficient to exhort commanders to be creative; resources must be found to support well-designed and promising (or proven) tactics.

Frequency & Format of Meetings

Meetings must be held frequently enough to get and keep commanders’ attention, to keep them focused on the achievement of valued outcomes, to keep chiefs informed about operational targets and tactics, and to provide feedback on the effectiveness of tactical decisions. No standard exists, to our knowledge. Some agencies with which we are familiar meet more often than monthly: Ashton holds its senior staff meetings on a weekly basis, and

Bradford holds its “Comstat” meetings bi-weekly. We do not see a compelling reason to hold Granger’s Compstat meetings more often than monthly, nor do we see a reason to hold them less often.

Compstat meetings have been chaired by a single individual, the assistant chief for operations. This is not an uncommon arrangement, though we have observed others that seemed to work well. In Bradford, the chief and deputy chiefs all play active parts in directing the meeting, albeit with the chief taking the lead role. In Indianapolis, similarly, a panel of three or four, including the department’s research partner, heard from and posed questions to commanders. We believe that an arrangement of this nature could work well in Granger.

NYPD’s Compstat meetings have included not only precinct commanders but also a number of other precinct and support personnel as well as staff from other criminal justice agencies (such as the district attorney’s office), and at one time NYPD hosted visiting law enforcement officials. Such greater inclusiveness might be expected to better communicate through the department the goals that Compstat is designed to serve and the strategies and tactics for which department personnel share responsibility. Yet this wider participation comes at a cost, and in a smaller agency like GPD, a proportionately larger cost.

Data & Intelligence

Compstat meetings, and preparations therefor, have identified a number of deficiencies in the information system, some that could be readily rectified, others that call for most costly correctives, and still others that are to some extent beyond the capacity of the department to affect. Some have been addressed, and some remain unresolved.

Despite these deficiencies, and the respects in which analysis of crime and disorder trends and patterns is impaired, many believe that analysis is underutilized. More could be done with the data that are available, and more information could be collected and put to analytic use. The work of the field intelligence officer could be better directed toward filling information gaps, and the information yields that the FIO generates could be better incorporated into analysis. And the quality of the data recorded by officers might improve if officers better understood the value and applications of the information.

We believe that high-quality analysis that will be useful for tactical decision-making is a function not only of the “supply” of analytic resources (particularly the crime analyst) but also, and especially, the demand for analytic findings by commanders and others in the GPD. As commanders, sergeants, detectives, and others become more adept in using analysis to do their jobs, they are likely to request forms of analysis that are not now being performed.

Recommendations

From our assessment of the issues discussed above, we believe that these recommendations follow.

- The expectations for captains in the Compstat process should be clarified. Platoon commanders are responsible for monitoring crime and disorder conditions during their respective shifts, identifying crime and disorder patterns, and taking steps to address those problems. Other unit commanders are responsible for coordinating their units’ efforts with those

of patrol. These are the primary matters about which captains would report at Compstat meetings.

- A structure by which captains can engage sergeants in the Compstat process should be established. This need not involve sergeants' attendance at Compstat meetings. It would involve a statement of sergeants' responsibilities in the process, and regular consultation of captains with sergeants concerning crime and disorder conditions and the formulation of operational plans to address those conditions. Similarly, a means of involving patrol officers and detectives in this process should be devised.
- The range of outcomes that are regularly measured and analyzed should be expanded to include quality-of-life conditions, and if possible, citizen satisfaction with police service.
- Scanning for and analysis of crime and disorder problems should be conducted over extended time frames.
- Grants that allow for the discretionary use of funding should be treated as reservoirs of resources that would support commanders' initiatives.
- Measures to better manage the call workload, such as differential police response, should be explored, as should other steps that would free patrol resources for strategic deployment (e.g., encouraging supervisors to override dispatch).
- Make greater use of field intelligence as an element of Compstat-related analysis.
- Consider the use of a panel rather than a single meeting moderator (e.g., a panel that includes the chief and both assistant chiefs).
- Consider expanding, at the margin, the range of personnel who attend Compstat meetings.

Endnotes

1. Commissioner Bratton's own account can be found in *Turnaround: How America's Top Cop Reversed the Crime Epidemic* (New York: Random House, 198), especially chapter 14.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 233.
3. See David Weisburd, Stephen D. Mastrofski, Ann Marie McNally, Rosann Greenspan, and James J. Willis, "Reforming to Preserve: Compstat and Strategic Problem Solving in American Policing," *Criminology & Public Policy* 2 (2003): 421-455.
4. Mark Moore, *Recognizing Value in Policing: The Challenge of Measuring Police Performance* (Washington: Police Executive Research Forum, 2002).
5. See James J. Willis, Stephen D. Mastrofski, and David Weisburd, *Compstat in Practice: An In-Depth Analysis of Three Cities* (Washington: Police Foundation, 2003); Eli B. Silverman, "Compstat's Innovation," in David Weisburd and Anthony A. Braga (eds.), *Police Innovation: Contrasting Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and more generally Robert D. Behn, *The Seven Big Errors of PerformanceStat* (Cambridge, Mass.: Kennedy School of Government, 2008).
6. Bratton, *Turnaround*, p. 239.