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RESEARCH ARTICLE



## Community policing during the pandemic

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### ABSTRACT

Community-oriented policing (COP) is a policing philosophy that focuses on the co-production of public safety by police officers and the community members they serve. This paper utilized the extreme context presented by the COVID-19 pandemic to test the theoretical assumptions on which COP is based. The data presented in this paper were collected from 32 community police officers (CPOs) from a Canadian police service who attended six focus group sessions during the fourth wave of the pandemic (July to November 2021). We summarize key findings and insights from these focus groups and provide insights relating to the underlying mechanisms essential to the delivery of effective COP programs. Future studies should continue to examine COP in diverse contexts to understand its benefits and challenges more fully.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### KEYWORDS

Community-oriented policing; community police officers; COVID-19; extreme context

## Introduction

Gill et al., (2017) define community-oriented policing (COP) as a law enforcement philosophy that ‘emphasizes the “co-production” of public safety by police and citizens’ (p. 5). COP programs require police and community members to work collaboratively to ‘define, prioritize, and address crime problems by drawing on a range of resources. . . instead of relying on the use of traditional law enforcement powers such as arrest’ (Gill et al., 2017, p. 5). Community police officers (CPOs) are expected to seek out face-to-face interactions with the public by adopting alternative patrol strategies (e.g., foot, bike) and are, ideally, assigned to the same beat for an extended period of time. These strategies are expected to help officers familiarize themselves with community concerns and develop positive relationships with residents. In theory, COP should reorient policing’s ‘core functions’ away from a crime control perspective towards a model that emphasizes relationship building, problem-solving, crime prevention, reassurance, and order maintenance. COP is commonly mentioned by both practitioners and academics as a feasible way to reform policing, address concerns relating to police-community relations, and reduce public dissatisfaction with reactive models of policing (Gill et al., 2014, 2017, Neyroud, 2021).

Despite widespread interest in this model of policing, efforts to implement COP programs and practices in a way that delivers on expectations can be challenging given the vast number of contextual variables that can influence how such programs are delivered and perceived (e.g., human capital and structural resources available to support COP programs, the socio-economic status of communities, the level of trust and the type of relationship that exists between the police and the public within communities; Dias Felix and Hilgers, 2020, Lum et al., 2020; Lum et al., 2017, Neyroud, 2021). A greater understanding of the contexts in which COP programs are delivered, and

how those contexts impact perceptions of these programs is, therefore, required to help interested police services implement effective COP programs.

Evaluations of COP have not paid sufficient attention to context (Mastrofski, 2006). We took the opportunity provided by the COVID-19 pandemic to examine the implementation of a COP program in an extreme context where government regulations and public health requirements (e.g., lockdowns, social distancing, masking) made it difficult, if not impossible, for CPOs to deliver on the central tenants of COP (e.g., engage in face-to-face relationship building activities with the public). In doing so we were able to test the theoretical assumptions on which COP is based; namely that relationship building and the establishment of trust in police are key to the success of this form of policing. Our study illustrates how disruptions to these key processes influence the ability of police services to deliver on the expected benefits of COP.

We begin the paper with a brief review of the literature on COP and a discussion of the COVID-19 context, specifically highlighting factors related to the pandemic response that may have had an impact on policing. We then outline the research methodology we used to conduct our study and present our results. The paper ends with a discussion that focuses on the implications of our findings for researchers and police practitioners.

## Literature review

The COP model was developed in response to concerns regarding poor relationships between the community and the police that could be linked to the reactive model of policing practiced in the 1960's (Eve et al., 2003). Early discussions around police legitimacy pushed police services to try proactive strategies, such as assigning officers to designated beats where they could engage with the community (Neyroud, 2017). As Sherman (1986) notes, however, these early attempts to apply proactive policing strategies often failed because services did not have a clear model or structure of how to implement such programs.

In the following decades, rising crime rates and high-profile research studies revealed a disconnect between what citizens want the police to do and what police actually do. Researchers reported that while policing, in general, was not particularly effective at impacting crime rates, proactive strategies (i.e., foot patrol) made police more visible and citizens less fearful of crime (Kelling et al., 1974, Pate et al., 1981). These early studies demonstrated the breadth of the policing role and encouraged the development of the COP philosophy, which re-oriented strategies from a narrow focus on law enforcement and crime fighting to a broader view centered around community concerns (Cordner, 1997). As discussed in more detail below, Cordner's (1997, 1998) work provided the necessary structure to support the use of COP teams by strategically linking broad ideas and beliefs to specific programs and practices, and identifying the structural changes needed to support them.

## The COP philosophy

Cordner (1997, 1998) developed a structure that frames discussions of COP around four pillars: philosophical, strategic, tactical, and organizational. As a *philosophy*, COP assumes that the community is central to the identification of, and response to, crime and safety concerns. *Strategically*, COP links the broad ideas and beliefs of community policing to the specific programs and practices that are implemented. The *tactical* pillar focuses on the concrete programs and practices that are implemented as part of a COP program while the *organizational* pillar identifies structural changes that need to occur within police services for COP to succeed.

COP requires police to change how they operate (Reisig, 2010), expanding the roles and duties of police officers to enable them to provide personalized service delivery and engage in both proactive and follow-up policing activities (Segrave & Ratcliffe, 2004). CPOs are expected to spend less time in cars and on patrol and more time on local problem solving, crime prevention education, and

developing positive relationships with community members. They are expected to seek out face-to-face interactions with the public and are assigned to the same beat for an extended period. These strategies are expected to help officers develop positive relationships with residents and to familiarize themselves with community concerns. Researchers believe that such changes should result in increased levels of public trust in the police and support from the community (Reisig, 2010).

Segrave and Ratcliffe (2004) observe that from an operational perspective COP programs can include any or all the following approaches: establishing community partnerships, focusing on public relations/media campaigns, developing mini-police stations, setting up Neighbourhood Watch programs, and hosting community meetings. Reisig (2010) points out that tactically, CPOs are encouraged to engage in local problem solving to help them understand the issues that are important to the communities they serve and tailor community-specific solutions to address those problems.

COP is expected to have impacts that differ from those associated with traditional policing (Greene, 2000). In a systematic review of the academic literature relating to COP, Gill et al., (2014) provide empirical evidence to support positive outcomes associated with COP, including increased community capacity to resist and prevent crime and social disorder, a reduction in citizen's fear of crime and enhanced perceptions of safety, improved relationships between community members and police, and community perceptions that police are legitimate and trustworthy. Due to these positive findings, the COP model has received considerable attention over the years from police administrators, practitioners, and academics leading to global COP implementation (for a review, see Mazerolle et al., 2013).

However, even though there is a considerable amount of research supporting the effectiveness of certain COP initiatives, especially those that involve very targeted interventions by police (e.g., Braga et al., 2014), there is less research that focuses specifically on the underlying mechanisms that make these initiatives effective. The COVID-19 pandemic provides a unique opportunity for researchers to consider COP implementation in a context where it is difficult, if not impossible, for officers to deliver on the central tenants of COP, such as community engagement and relationship building. As such, our research adds to the body of scholarly work that already exists on this topic, which has relied on methodologies that are very different from the extreme case study that we report on here (e.g., Hawdon and Ryan, 2003; Peyton et al., 2019).

### ***The COVID-19 pandemic: An extreme context***

An extreme context can be defined as one in which events occur that rupture the normal functioning, and/or routines, of organizations and require an organized response that has significant consequences for individuals and groups who are members of, or related to, the organization (Hällgren et al., 2018). COVID-related events required an organized response from all levels of government (see Table 1) that resulted in unprecedented changes for most Canadians, including police officers. While there is limited research available that explores the impact of the pandemic on CPOs, several recent studies do speak to how the pandemic has impacted police more generally. For example, a survey study of 1000+ front-line Canadian police officers undertaken by Compeau and Duxbury (2021) during the third wave of the pandemic (February to June 2021) determined that police officers faced several unique challenges during the pandemic. They reported that following COVID-19 protocols, managing calls related to COVID-19 issues (on average, officers spent 6.5 hours per week dealing with COVID-19 related activities), and the need to work extra hours to replace colleagues who were absent from work because they had been exposed to or contracted the virus) had increased their work-role demands.

Other research links the initiatives taken by the government to limit the spread of the virus to changes in expectations regarding the responsibilities of police officers, and the number and type of calls for service that were being received (e.g., increase in domestic violence calls, decrease in traffic violations; Maskály et al., 2021). Of relevance to the current study are data showing that the

**Table 1.** COVID –19 events in CANCITY.

Date	COVID–19 events in CANCITY <sup>1</sup>
<b>2020</b>	
March 11	First identified COVID–19 case is recorded.
March 25	First COVID–19 death is confirmed and city enters a state of emergency.
May 2	Anti-lockdown protesters gather downtown despite emergency orders.
May 16	City begins a phased reopening.
July 7	Mask mandate and non-compliance fines are implemented.
September 16	Record daily increases in cases and 66% of cases are from racialized communities.
September 18	Second wave begins.
December 14	COVID vaccines arrive in CANCITY.
December 26	City goes into lockdown.
<b>2021</b>	
January 6	First vaccines are delivered.
February 14	Front line police officers receive vaccines.
February 17	Third wave begins.
February 20	108 fines are given for illegal gatherings and businesses operating during lockdown.
March 31	CANCITY food banks cite crisis level food insecurity
April 1	Vulnerable populations are hit hard by outbreaks and require additional protection.
April 3	COVID cases rise by 25% and city goes into lockdown.
April 8	Hospital and ICE admissions rise and officials declare a state of emergency.
April 16	Mayor gives police authority to enforce restrictions.
May 20	Re-opening plan is announced as cases drop and vaccine rates increase.
August 1	Large social gatherings identified as super spreaders and cases spike among youth.
August 12	Fourth wave begins.
September 21	Proof of vaccination is federally mandated for some locations and services.

pandemic changed how often officers engage in reactive (e.g., arrests) versus proactive (e.g., COP activities) policing strategies. More specifically, the available literature provides support for the idea that during the pandemic police agencies reduced arrests for less serious crimes as well as other enforcement actions, while also limiting proactive police activities (Alexander & Ekici, 2020; Lum et al., 2020; Maskály et al., 2021).

Drew and Martin (2021) reported that the expectation that police officers would enforce COVID –19 related restrictions was a significant source of stress for officers who worried about enforcing restrictions on non-compliant individuals. This worry seems justified given that research has linked publicized accounts of officers applying COVID-related enforcement to negative perceptions of the police (Meško, 2021). Other research provides support for the idea that government enforced lockdown measures imposed during the pandemic and the concomitant decrease in foot traffic reduced the number of opportunities that CPOs had to interact and communicate with members of the community (Ashby, 2020; Lum et al., 2020). These actions meant that CPOs were less visible, which is unfortunate given research showing that officer visibility is positively associated with the likelihood that people within the community will perceive that the police are effective (Ghaemmaghami et al., 2021). Finally, existing research provides support for the idea that the COVID–19 pandemic made it more challenging for CPOs to engage with community members and build the relationships necessary to support this form of policing (Ashby, 2020; Lum et al., 2020; Meško, 2021) and to access resources from community agencies to address crime (Laufs & Waseem, 2020).

## The current study

The literature presented above supports our claim that the COVID–19 pandemic created an extreme context that has the potential to rupture the normal functioning of COP officers. Our study capitalized on the opportunity offered by the pandemic to conduct a case study examining how this extreme context impacted the ability of six separate COP teams operating in a mid-sized Canadian city (CANCITY) to execute a COP program.

To contextualize our findings, it is important to describe the police service implementing the model, the history of COP in CANCITY, and the CANCITY communities where the model is being

**Table 2.** CANCITY police service evolution events.

Year	Changes to CANCITY police service <sup>2</sup>
1995	CANCITY police services amalgamate into largest municipal service in the country.
1997	60 full-time CPOs and 8 staff sergeants deployed in each of the three CANCITY districts.
2012	Mental health facilities closed and police demand increases.
2015	Budget cuts led to the restructuring of police services.
2017	CPOs are redeployed to front-line duties and COP program is abolished due to limited capacity resulting in public backlash.
2018	Community problems surge, 93% of calls for service go unanswered, and public expresses dissatisfaction with police.
2019	Police service admits flaws and re-introduces 60 CPOs in priority communities.

implemented (see Table 2). The CANCITY police service is a reasonably large municipal police service in Canada. The service is under-resourced in terms of human capital, and it struggles to meet the demands of the community. CANCITY includes several socio-economically challenged communities. Within these communities most police calls can be linked to homelessness, social disorder, and mental health issues. COP initiatives were introduced in 2017 to address the needs of residents in these high priority socioeconomically challenged communities. These initiatives were not, however, evaluated and were discontinued in 2017 due to funding pressures. Due in part to community backlash over this decision, COP teams were re-introduced in CANCITY in 2019 in various priority neighbourhoods. It is these teams that are the focus of the current study.

The six CANCITY communities where the COP teams have been assigned have diverse racialized populations, experience a variety of socio-economic challenges, report high levels of crime and social disorder, and account for the largest proportion of CANCITY police calls for service (information provided by CANCITY police). The media in CANCITY is replete with stories that demonstrate the challenges the CPOs face trying to build positive relationships with disenfranchised members of these communities. However, these stories are offset by others expressing community support for the COP initiative, suggesting that some in the community see it as a way to improve their quality of life.

## Methods

### The sample

During the fourth wave of the pandemic (August to November 2021) we conducted focus groups with the CPOs deployed in six CANCITY neighbourhoods. Information about the focus group sessions was communicated to the Sergeants in charge of each of the six COP teams and focus groups were scheduled at a time when most officers could attend. Officers from all six COP teams operating in CANCITY during the pandemic ( $n = 39$ ; 65% of CPOs) participated in the study. Sample demographics are presented in Table 3. Most of the officers who attended the sessions were male ( $n = 32$ ) with significant job experience ( $M = 7$  years for the service). All CPOs had worked in

**Table 3.** Demographics.

Communities	Gender		Years of service	
	Male	Female	Mean	Range
1	9	2	9	4–15
2	5	0	9	6–17
3	4	2	12	6–22
4	5	1	10	6.5–16
5	4	2	7	3–12
6	5	0	11	5–21
Total	32	7		

patrol prior to working as a CPO. The demographics of the sample of officers who participated in the focus groups is very similar to demographics of the total sample of CPOs.

### **Data collection**

We used a focus group methodology in this study. Focus groups involve assembling a group of people (in this case CPOs who had worked together during the pandemic) who are guided via a facilitator to provide feedback on a clearly defined topic (Morgan, 1997). This qualitative research methodology was selected for use in this study because it encourages candid responses, allows participants to ‘piggyback’ off each other’s ideas, leverages the team’s collective experiences, and makes it possible for researchers to go beyond the numbers and gain insights that would be harder to gather using a survey methodology (Morgan, 1997). It is also important to acknowledge that CPOs have many demands on their time and a focus group methodology proved to be a very efficient way to collect information from a substantive group of people.

The focus groups lasted between 1 and 2.5 hours and were facilitated by one of the two lead researchers on the project (the second and third authors). Between five and 12 officers attended each of the focus groups. Several questions were used to guide the discussion. Responses to the following questions are reported in this paper: (1) In your view, what is the role of a CPO? (2) How has the pandemic impacted your ability to carry out your community policing role? (3) During the pandemic, did you learn any lessons that you can apply to being a good CPO when the pandemic is over? and, (4) What is one thing you would want your service to know about your experience working as a CPO during the pandemic?

### **Data analysis**

Detailed notes were taken by members of the research team during the focus group sessions (two note takers per session). These two sets of notes were merged and cleaned. This process resulted in text that represented what was said in each of the six focus groups. We used content analysis (Berg, 2007), to code the data. Content coding is a systematic approach to qualitative data analysis that systematically allocates data into content categories that represent the ideas, patterns, or themes that occur in the text. Relationships between categories are then identified. A main strength of this approach is that it provides a structured method for quantifying focus group data (Berg, 2007).

The analysis was conducted by one member of our research team (the first author) to ensure reliability of the coding process and validated by one other member of the team (the second author). The following steps were followed in all cases. The coder began by reading the notes several times to develop familiarity with the data and to identify nascent themes. Concepts of meaning were identified within the text and given a label (i.e., a code) that represented the meaning of the concept that had been identified. Codes were sorted into categories to provide structure to the data. The codes were reviewed by the second author and any necessary changes were incorporated into the coding scheme. Frequencies of categories were calculated (each focus group was considered a separate case). In the Results sections below, we present the findings from this analysis for each of the four different questions of relevance to this study. Direct quotes from officers are included to help the reader appreciate what we heard during these sessions.

## **Results**

### **The CPO role**

We first asked officers how they define their role as a CPO. There was a high degree of consensus within our sample on how they defined their role, with all officers agreeing that they were to be a co-

producer of public safety and build relationships with the community. Officers also emphasized the importance of differentiating their role from the role of patrol officer.

### **Co-producing public safety**

CPOs saw their role as co-producing public safety by working with community members ('people in the community have our work numbers'), to identify problems ('we need to identify major issues within the community because every community is different'), bringing in resources, and coordinating the response ('investigate complaints while coordinating with specialty units'), to solve crime problems ('this team has effectively dealt with two problem addresses by knowing people one-on-one in the areas').

### **Relationship building**

Officers emphasized that co-producing public safety requires them to proactively engage in activities which enable them to develop positive relationships with community stakeholders. CPOs emphasized the importance of establishing a presence ('you're out there and you have to talk to everyone'), that is positive ('a constant familiar face in the community'), and consistent ('it takes 3–4 months to build rapport with community') to repair relationships broken by reactive policing. Officers highlighted examples of compassion and trust developed in both directions from these activities. One officer stated: 'Because of the relationships they become people, you understand why they are where they are. Yeah, they've done some things but they're still a person behind all that.' Another officer provided the following description:

'This one guy was at an extreme, he didn't like us. He would yell at us from his balcony for talking to someone in the parking lot...we engaged with him over multiple events and now our relationship is completely different... now he comes out and says hi to us.'

*Relationship building requires differentiating our role from those working in patrol.* The COP teams noted the importance of differentiating themselves from patrol officers as the communities were deeply dissatisfied with the reactive model of policing. They felt the CPO's job was to provide a service to the community ('so they feel like we are there to help them') that patrol officers could not ('that's the difference between us and patrol, you're already there when stuff is happening... they're more likely to tell you stuff'). They attribute the time they spend in communities as the key differentiator that allows them to establish trust ('they refused to speak to patrol. But spilt the beans to us'). One CPO elaborated on this idea as follows:

There was a well-known drug dealer in the area that our officers built a relationship with. We made efforts to communicate with her without penalizing her for her crimes. Then one day she came and turned in stolen laptops. That's a way to measure success. It's hard to put it on paper but people are letting us in.

### **Impact of the pandemic on the CPO role**

Next, we asked officers how the pandemic impacted their ability to carry out their role as they defined it. In the focus groups, officers talked about how the pandemic and subsequent actions taken by municipal, provincial, and federal governments negatively impacted their ability to deliver on the two key role responsibilities of the CPO: to co-produce public safety and to build positive relationships within the community.

### **Negatively impacted ability to co-produce public safety**

Officers in all six teams shared examples of how the pandemic, in general, impacted their ability to co-produce public safety. Officers felt that community concerns had shifted from crime and social disorder to how best to minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission and protect vulnerable groups within the area. These findings are consistent with data showing that active



cases were higher in the communities where CPOs were assigned. Understanding and respecting these concerns discouraged officers from entering establishments and talking to people which, in turn, made it harder for them to engage with the community and develop positive relationships.

Officers also highlighted how lockdowns, social distancing measures, and isolation periods impacted their ability to address community concerns. CPOs continued to make arrests during the pandemic, but reduced jail capacity and backlogs in the court system meant that criminals were quickly released back into the community where they would re-offend. CPOs were frustrated with this turn of events, stating that all they can do is disrupt crime, but ultimately crime can't be stopped. As one officer stated: 'theft is pretty much legal now, the courts are just throwing them out. . . it didn't take long for repeat offenders to realize they wouldn't go to jail.' According to the CPOs, this situation negatively impacted community members' perceptions of them. Specifically, re-offences were blamed on CPOs and community members accused them of not doing their job. Inability to address crime problems was exacerbated by government mandated isolation periods. As front-line employees, officers were frequently exposed to the virus and losing officers to isolation periods reduced capacity and gave them less community coverage ('entire areas of the community are being ignored').

### ***Negatively impacted relationship building***

Second, all groups indicated that their usual strategies to engage with the community were no longer effective. During lockdowns, many community events were cancelled which limited opportunities to engage with the public. One officer observed that: 'There used to be rec nights. You could drop in at all these events (bingo, dart night, etc.). Now we can't as they are cancelled.' Another officer explained:

We used to attend community functions . . . this was very good for relationship building. We would talk to youth at these events . . . without them feeling like they were 'snitching.' This built a level of comfort with youth, so that when we saw them in the street, we could talk to them . . . because of lockdown . . . we lost the opportunity to connect with youth in a comfortable manner.

Events that were not cancelled were moved to virtual platforms which officers felt was an ineffective way to build relationships ('COP doesn't work virtual. It has to be in person'), especially during the initial contact with community members.

Finally, CPOs felt the mask mandate hindered relationship building by making it harder for them to read facial expressions and interpret how community members were reacting to them. Many officers indicated they felt faceless when they had their masks on noting that people either didn't recognize them or thought they looked more intimidating. The following comment summarizes what we heard from officers:

'It is hard to build relationships with community stakeholders while maintaining social distancing, wearing masks, etc. We tried holding events in gyms, but everyone stood far apart, were masked and shouting, not conducive at all to relationship building.'

### ***Impacted our ability to differentiate our role from those working in patrol***

In five of the focus groups, officers indicated that government actions meant that CPOs and patrol officers engaged in essentially the same types of activities. They felt that this negatively impacted community members' perceptions of them. Specifically, they mentioned that during the pandemic CPOs were expected to take on enforcement activities. Such activities were at odds with what the CPOs were expected to do, making it hard for the community to distinguish between CPOs and patrol officers. As one officer noted:

Then they brought up this order that we are going to check people. People are coming to us like what the heck. It really scared people. It was really hard for us . . . That was a big set-back for us with the community . . . they thought we were picking on them or racial profiling.

### ***Impact of social movements following the murder of George Floyd***

While we asked our focus group participants to talk about how the pandemic had impacted their ability to fulfill their role, we note that without prompting, all six groups also talked about how the negative impacts of the pandemic on their ability to co-produce public safety and to build positive relationships was exacerbated by social movements following the murder of George Floyd in March of 2020.

CPOs shared that community members accepted and perpetuated biases they saw in the media, interfered with their ability to do their job ('random people walk by, harass us, film us'), and became unwilling to collaborate. Officers talked about how members of the community, particularly racialized individuals, started to believe that the publicized incidents of the misuse of force by police officers was representative of all police, including CPO's ('people believe they have to hate you because of your role. . . they are far, far away from the point of wanting to build a relationship'). Other CPOs spoke about how relationships in the racialized communities where they served were breaking down: 'how are we going to build these bridges, and resolve the whole culture of anti-police if you don't want us there.'

### ***Lessons learned that can be applied post-pandemic***

In the focus groups, officers shared things about the role of CPOs that they either learned because of, or that were reinforced by, their experience policing during the pandemic. Specifically, our findings provide support for the idea that the pandemic taught officers that they are adaptable, reinforced, in their minds, the value of COP (as compared with the reactive model of policing), and emphasized how important it was for the service to continue to invest in COP initiatives.

#### ***CPOs are adaptable***

CPOs emphasized that when the activities that worked to fulfill their role pre-pandemic no longer worked during the pandemic, they worked as a team to overcome challenges and find new ways to serve the community. They explained that the communities they serve were hit hard during the pandemic, which created ('new opportunities') to help ('we had the time to deliver food to people in need in the community').

The CPOs also realized the value of empathy in working with the community to identify pandemic-related problems. One team shared a story of how they addressed a problem through empathy and teamwork:

We met this lady who came up from the States and was being targeted for where she was from. . . She was living at the motel with her two kids in one room . . . her son is autistic. It was a really bad situation for her. We got her in touch with housing . . . even got furniture donated for her for her house and on New Year's Day we all went and helped her move in. We went from meeting this woman, talking to her, seeing what she needed, and acting on it.

#### ***The value of COP compared with the reactive model of policing***

The CPOs we spoke to shared that, to them, the pandemic reinforced the value of proactive approaches to policing. Officers highlighted the importance of smiling to enable positive interactions with the public ('a smile or facial expression can de-escalate a situation'), a practice that was lost during mask mandates. The impact of smiling was reinforced during a re-opening period in CANCITY: 'it was good to take masks off outside yesterday. . . people commented that they were happy to see us smile, not wearing masks.'

They also learned the value of conversations for fostering police-community relationships. For example, officers shared that having conversations with community members who are causing problems, as opposed to reprimanding them, allows them to empathize with the individual. One officer explained an example of this:

The harshest punishment is not always the right one, sometimes a conversation is more impactful. For example, if people are in a space they are not supposed to be, simply talking to them about why they are there can be better . . . maybe they just needed to get out of their house.

Many officers stated that the need for CPOs to differentiate themselves from patrol became increasingly important throughout the pandemic. Officers who were expected to take on enforcement activities actively tried to emphasize differences between them and patrol ('show that we are more than just enforcement'), and continued to implement a proactive approach by engaging with individuals and showing them respect ('I let them know at every opportunity that I have to be present, and I put it on them to invite me in'). During the focus groups the officers emphasized how the need for CPOs to encourage positive relationships between the police and the community became particularly important following the murder of George Floyd and community backlash against police. The CPOs noted that they had observed that by opening a dialogue between themselves and community members they were able to differentiate themselves from patrol officers ('they didn't want us in there anymore. . . we had to go and explain that he [the officers involved in the George Floyd incidence] didn't reflect us . . . we had to build back our trust').

### ***COP requires integrated resourcing***

Finally, four teams stated that they would like their service to know that if they are going to adopt a COP model, the service must resource it appropriately. As CPOs, they felt that they were doing important work ('we are having an impact') in the communities they serve but were frustrated because in their experience, proactive policing requires a multi-pronged approach (e.g., police, social services, city resources, etc.) and they simply did not have the resources they needed to do the job the way it should be done ('we want to do more, just give us the tools and resources'). Officers shared that this lack of resources was impacting their ability to deliver on their key role responsibilities because they could not solve crime problems that mattered to the community, which made it difficult for community members to differentiate them from the reactive model they were burned by in the past. For example, one police officer stated:

'They say we have access to city resources, but that's not true. We don't have the city resources available to come and help the people who need them. I call these services, and get told they'll get back to me, but they never do. Getting support from city resources was supposed to be part of the COP vision, but we are not getting the collaboration we need.'

## **Discussion**

Studying the implementation of COP in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic supported the COP's theoretical assumptions that relationship building and the establishment of trust are key to the success of this type of policing. Perhaps more importantly, our study also shed light on how fragile police-community relationships and trust can be during real-world implementations of COP, especially when the context is sub-optimal for delivering on the central tenants of the model.

CPOs in our sample defined their role in a way that is consistent with the literature. Of note, all COP teams we spoke to felt that their role was very different from that performed by patrol officers and that COP is needed to repair police-community relationships and establish trust (see [Table 4](#)). These insights were driven by the fact that government responses to the pandemic made it very hard for CPOs to differentiate themselves from patrol officers and, according to the CPOs in our focus groups, this meant that community members started to perceive CPO programs as no different from the reactive model of policing they were dissatisfied with. This frustrated the CPOs who reported that the positive relationships they had worked hard to establish (particularly in racialized communities) had broken down during the pandemic and that trust in the police had similarly declined.

**Table 4.** Differentiations between COP and reactive models of policing made by CPOs.

	COP	Reactive
Presence	Dedicated presence Friendly (approachable)	Response Intimidating
Interactions	Unbiased (fair) Trustworthy Compassionate Community focused	Biased Untrustworthy Controlling Enforcement focused
Community perceptions	CPOs are a reliable presence dedicated to solving community problems CPOs deliver sustainable solutions to community problems.	Patrol officers respond when there is an issue but do not follow-up. Patrol delivers temporary fixes to community problems.

Although these findings are predominantly negative, it is important to note that CPOs in our sample appeared to adapt remarkably well to the pandemic and their experiences may help future CPOs navigate complex situations. Based on our data, CPOs learned important lessons about COP that allowed them to adapt to the pandemic as individuals and as teams. Officers talked about how the pandemic reinforced the fact that empathy is a key part of the CPO's job and how important it was for them to differentiate themselves from patrol officers to address negative perceptions of police and maintain positive community relationships. These findings emphasize how important positive relationships driven by empathy are to the ultimate success of CPO programs.

Also important is the extent to which the officers we talked to emphasized how successful implementation of COP initiatives requires adequate resourcing and police service support. The need for adequate resourcing was made especially clear in the extreme context we investigated where old problems were exacerbated, and new ones were created. According to many of the CPOs in our focus groups, resourcing for the COP teams in CANCITY was not adequate. These officers felt that the lack of adequate resourcing was making it very difficult, if not impossible, for them to effectively address important community issues. While adequate resourcing from the police service was seen as critically important, the CPOs also felt that the city needed to provide additional resources to support people who were homeless and in poor mental health. They talked about how CPOs on their own could not solve many of the social issues they encountered within the communities they served and spoke of the need for more funding to support a broader social services ecosystem that would help them to meet their mandate; a mandate they felt passionate about. According to the CPOs in our study, it is through this more coordinated, collaborative approach that disorder will be meaningfully reduced, and root causes of crime will be effectively managed.

Beyond adequate resourcing, our data shows the importance of police service support for COP activities. CPOs in our sample who were expected to take on enforcement activities during the pandemic gave evidence that this tarnished the relationships they had dedicated time to building (this was compounded by social movements in response to police violence in the media). Both community members and CPOs in CANCITY do not see enforcement activities as aligned with the COP model.

Many of the issues that CPOs in our sample faced, such as dealing with mental health and social disorder issues, are widespread in the current context of policing and are expected to continue post-pandemic (Jones, 2020). If police services and communities can work through these issues, this will likely support the successful implementation of COP in a way that allows this model of police to deliver on the outcomes we desire and have come to expect from the model.

### **Study limitations and future research directions**

Although our focus groups unveiled several important findings related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on COP in CANCITY, and on the role that key factors play in delivering

effective COP services to communities, our study is not without limitations. Two limitations in particular warrant further discussion. First, given the methodology we employed, we cannot determine whether our findings generalize to other settings that have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The degree to which they do will depend on how closely the COP initiatives in other contexts are like the initiative we examined, and how similar the community contexts are to the neighbourhoods we examined (e.g., in terms of demographics, socio-economic challenges, and relations with the local police service). We believe, however, that our study sheds light on some of the key building blocks that underlie successful implementations of COP initiatives (i.e., adequate resources, differentiation of CPO and patrol officer roles, the importance of empathy and the development of positive social relationships between police and community members), and that key findings from this study will be valuable in other policing jurisdictions. Future studies should continue to explore these findings in diverse contexts.

Second, the results from the present study do not speak to the effectiveness of the COP teams that have been implemented in CANCEITY, only to the experiences of the officers on these teams. While the CPOs in our focus groups believe that COP does allow them to provide more effective policing to the communities they serve and leads to the sorts of positive outcomes often reported in the research literature (e.g., better police-community relations), we provide no data demonstrating that these things are true. Future research in CANCEITY will have to empirically examine the effectiveness of the COP teams before this determination can be made. Ideally, this would take the form of a randomized controlled trial comparing communities that do and do not have assigned COP teams, but if this is not possible, pre-post comparisons can be made in relevant communities to evaluate the impact of the teams.

## Conclusion

Our examination of COP in an extreme context supports the key assumptions on which the model is based and provides a greater understanding of how the context in which COP is implemented challenges CPOs to deliver the benefits we have come to expect from the model for police, police services, and communities. The extreme context of the COVID-19 pandemic taught us that the community issues CPOs in our sample regularly face (e.g., high rates of mental illness, crime, and social disorder) were exacerbated by the context of the communities they served during the pandemic (e.g., restrictions on social activities, negative perceptions of police following publicized instances of police misuse of force) as well as the context of the CANCEITY police service (e.g., a lack of resourcing to support COP and the re-assignment of COP activities that were not in line with the model), which made it difficult for CPOs to carry out their roles.

CPOs in our sample provided some important lessons they learned in this context and believe these lessons would improve their performance in the future. Namely, CPOs need to dedicate time and effort to implementing programs in a way that makes their value clear to community members so that they can get the buy-in necessary for relationships and trust to develop. For the officers we engaged with, this involved establishing positive relationships with community members driven by empathy for their situations and differentiating themselves from traditional reactive models of policing that they feel their communities are dissatisfied with. It would be beneficial for future researchers to look further into how diverse contexts influence the implementation of COP and if the lessons provided here transfer to different contexts.

## Notes

1. (CTV News Ottawa, 2021).
2. All information in this table was provided by CANCEITY police.

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## Ethics clearance

This project was approved by the Office of Research Services and Ethics at Carleton University [Ethics clearance ID: Project number 112,146]

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