

Community Security and the Institutional Assumption

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Throughout America, communities are establishing task forces to respond to police abuse and the murder of Black citizens. These task forces have variously recommended cuts in police budgets and reform of systems for the selection of police officers, their training and discipline. Many task forces have broadened their recommendations to include relocating police functions to social service agencies that have purview over homelessness, mental health and social service work. This relocation is designed to assure that the police are able to concentrate time and resources on functions that are “properly” in their domain – community security and safety.

In this relocation of functions the key actors are two institutions – the police and human service agencies. There are some task forces that also give a nod to local neighborhoods by recommending intensified efforts at improving police-community relations.

For years there have been studies of the factors that are critical in creating and maintaining neighborhood safety and security. They consistently demonstrate that the principle determinant of local security is citizen relationships and the activities of their associations.¹ Therefore, any serious effort to deal with neighborhood security and safety will require a primary focus on local associational life rather than a reformed police department or locally engaged human service agencies.

If reform-oriented task forces want to be effective, they will necessarily have to consider the functions of local citizens’ associational life as a domain where safety and security functions can be relocated or newly performed.²

For those task forces willing to focus their basic work on neighborhoods and the associational life manifested there, a map of the functions of associations is useful. These functions include:

¹ See especially *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect* by Robert J. Sampson

² For a more specific description of the associational world see [The Four-Legged Stool: The Unique Functions of Associations in Community Life](#) by John McKnight (2013). This can be found on the ABCD Institute website, abcdinstitute.org.

- In times of emergency or crisis, associations are frequently able to respond more rapidly than institutions.
- Associational responses tend to be individualized and personal rather than programmatic and institutional.
- Associations elicit and use popular knowledge in their work while institutions tend to use technical information.
- Associations are the site for citizen-based problem solving.
- Associations create local power by aggregating individual concerns into the capacity for collective action.
- Associations are citizen vehicles for collective advocacy.
- Associations provide settings where leadership opportunities proliferate and, as a result many more leaders are identified and developed.
- Associations provide the context for the interactive formation of community values and opinion.
- Associations provide context for behavioral change best exemplified by Alcoholics Anonymous and other Twelve Step Programs.
- Associational formation provides proliferating opportunities for new forms of civic engagement. The ease of formation creates many new relationships and initiatives that are evoked by demands of the times e.g. community security, local food production, health activities etc.
- Associations provide mediating functions between institutions and individual citizens.
- Associations have conceived and initiated the creation of many new institutions e.g. hospitals, universities, social services.
- Associations are the principle site for care. They hold citizens together because each cares about the other, or they care about the same thing. Operating outside the market, a community's associations are the primary indicator of what citizens care about enough to act collectively.

Once the functions of associations become the central focus of reform oriented task forces, they can ask four basic questions:

1. How can our institutions support the associational functions?
2. What institutional policies and practices have deterred or opposed the growth or power of local associational functions?
3. What functions that police attempt to perform could be better performed by relocating them to newly empowered local associations?
4. How can we re-orient our working map so that neighborhood associations are at the center and institutions act as a support unit for their activity?

The Institutional Assumption

The current police task force efforts are a useful example of the importance of how a question is framed. If the issue is framed by an *institutional assumption* that the police and agencies are the key actors in producing security, they will exclude the most important actor – the associational world.

Most questions of community well-being are framed as though any goal can best be achieved as the result of more effective institutional intervention and intensified institutional coalitions. It is this framing assumption that is the cause of many failed reforms.

In the pursuit of community security, health, education and child raising, ignoring the present or potential functions of associational life ensures that these issues will continue to be unresolved.³

³ For a description of seven basic functions for which associations are critical to problem solving, see [Neighborhood Necessities: Seven Functions That Only Effectively Organized Neighborhoods Can Provide](#) by John McKnight (2013). This can be found on the ABCD Institute website, abcdinstitute.org.