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Comparing the Implementation of a Best Practice Crime Policy Across Cities

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Abstract

There is a substantial gap in knowledge of the practical application of comprehensive "best practice" public policies and how these policies are actually implemented. This research examines implementation of a comprehensive best practices gang reduction policy across three cities. Action research case study methodology shows that explanations for diverse implementation arose from each city's ecological constitution, which is a necessary antecedent to categorization according to Matland's policy implementation typology. This study affirms the use of an ecological perspective and supports the use of Matland's typology in a collaborative and comparative public policy context.

Keywords

gangs, policy implementation, crime policy

Practitioners of social and public policy are acutely aware of the complex and multidimensional hazards to the health and welfare of citizens. As a result of this awareness and funding streams devoted to partnerships, communities across the nation are adopting comprehensive, multiagency strategies to address

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emerging community challenges, some informed by best practice research. Concurrently, researchers have taken a keen interest in the processes and outcomes associated with these comprehensive strategies as these approaches spread (Umemoto et al., 2009; Woodford, 2010).

The implementation of a state-promulgated, comprehensive gang violence policy is compared across three cities in this study. The policy, the Comprehensive Gang Model (CGM), is considered a best practice gang reduction initiative that has identified critical strategy areas (Spergel, 1995) but nebulous implementation steps and outcomes. The CGM brings together prevention, intervention, and suppression strategies, across multiple agencies, in support of safe communities. Given the growth of best practices in the public arena (National Governor's Association, 2010), research is needed on the processes by which such policies are implemented. This is especially true for best practices that are less explicit about implementation. Matland's (1995) ambiguity/conflict model of implementation is used to explore why different approaches to implementation were undertaken in three cities adopting the same policy. Matland's typology alone, however, is insufficient to understand how and why policy implementation varied. An ecological perspective is a crucial antecedent to understanding implementation.

To understand the implementation of the CGM as it unfolded in three urban cities, two questions were explored:

> *Research Question 1*: How has implementation of the CGM varied across three urban cities?
> *Research Question 2*: Why has implementation of the CGM varied across three urban cities?

The study investigates implementation, or outputs, rather than the outcomes of policy implementation. What distinguishes this research from other implementation studies is the length of study (4 years), the multiagency collaboration, and the use of action research methods to study policy implementation across cities. Best practice, relevant implementation research, and theoretical orientations are discussed first. The complex public policy problem of gang violence and the CGM are then introduced. The study's methodology is provided, followed by findings. Concluding comments focus on the implications and relevance to researchers, practitioners, and policymakers interested in public policy.

Best Practice

States and the federal government have funded comprehensive strategies informed by best practices research in response to the complex stressors of

contemporary community challenges (Bond & Gittell, 2010; Gray, Duran, & Segal, 1997). These strategies, applied through policy directives, are intended to support "what works" and bring policy research to life in areas of need. Best practices are considered models or exemplars that can guide practical application (Overman & Boyd, 1994). Even as these policies spread, there remains a substantial gap in knowledge relative to the practical application of comprehensive policies considered best practices and how these policies are implemented. Best practices research tends to focus on programs as the unit of analysis rather than on policies. In truth, programs tend to have more limited implementation problems than policies (Liberman, 2010). A further shortcoming of best practice policy research is that it is not well understood in the multiagency context that pervades the public arena today (Hasenfeld & Brock, 1991; O'Toole, 2000).

Researchers have explored the characterization of best practices, and there are some common understandings from this work. Best practices represent activities, practices, or procedures that are advanced in comparison to other methods. Best practices might be used as a benchmark by which practices can be assessed or as a roadmap to reach a desired end (Bretschneider, Marc-Aurele, & Wu, 2005; Overman & Boyd, 1994). In this sense, a best practice is suggested to serve as a guide for replication in other contexts with a focus on process to achieve successful outcomes. A notable amount of research has been undertaken on best practices, or similar ideas of promising practices and "what works" in the field of crime and justice. Key elements of successful programs, such as those targeting recidivism and those targeting crime reduction, are becoming well documented in the literature (i.e., Lipsey, Petrie, Weisburd, & Gottfredson, 2006; Sherman, Farrington, Welsh, & MacKenzie, 2002). There exist institutes that certify "model programs" in violence prevention (Center for the Study of Violence Prevention, 2010), as well as an institute to disseminate the highest quality systematic reviews of best practices in a number of topic areas (Campbell Collaboration, 2010). These institutes attempt to infuse greater quality and evidence into crime and justice practice and research. Interestingly, an explicit discussion of implementation issues is notably absent in crime and justice research. Arguably, just as a program evaluation must have a good process evaluation, a policy implementation analysis is critical to understanding the effectiveness of policy.

The Massachusetts Legislature provided approximately US$40 million dollars to 17 community collaboratives between 2006 and 2010 to implement comprehensive, gang violence–reduction strategies, based on the "best"[1] practices of the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's CGM. Under the specified grant conditions, funded cities were to partner with public, nonprofit, and/or private agencies

to provide social service and law enforcement support. Local Action Research Partners (LARPs) were simultaneously funded to work with funded cities, providing technical and research support. What resulted were long-term partnerships whereby researchers worked hand in hand with community partners to understand local gang problems, develop and implement best practices, tackle implementation challenges, and document lessons and successes. This article examines the nexus of implementation and best practices in that comprehensive, collaborative framework.

Policy Implementation

O'Toole (2000) writes that "implementation research concerns the development of systematic knowledge regarding what emerges, or is induced, as actors deal with a policy problem" (p. 266). Some have examined implementation within a specific context (Montjoy & O'Toole, 1979; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973); some have studied implementation via the top-down lens (Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1981), whereas others have examined implementation from the bottom-up (Berman, 1980; Hjern & Porter, 1981). At present, insights of policy implementation have grown, have proven to be complex (Hasenfeld & Brock, 1991; Hjern, 1982; O'Toole, 2000), and offer valuable lessons for the future (Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1981).

Contemporary views have blended some of these perspectives and crafted new ways of examining and understanding the implementation of public policy (Matland, 1995; Mischen & Sinclair, 2009). Matland (1995) proposed a contingency model that unites the bottom-up and top-down approaches to understanding policy implementation. Matland frames the model around policy ambiguity and conflict. Policy conflict arises when there are different or conflicting opinions regarding policy goals or activities among implementing actors. Policy ambiguity refers to the clarity or precision of policy goals or means that can influence implementation. Matland constructed a typology of implementation, based on the level and nature of policy conflict and ambiguity. The horizontal side of Table 1 represents the characterization of ambiguity (i.e., low or high), whereas the vertical dimension illustrates the level of conflict engendered by any given policy. In each quadrant, there is a reference to a *central principle* that is suggested to influence outcomes.

In administrative implementation, there is low ambiguity and conflict in implementation. Here, resources, such as adequate staffing or technology, determine the outcome. In the case of political implementation, ambiguity is low, but there is high conflict in how implementation occurs. Outcomes are decided by power where some participants have enough power to pressure the

Table 1. Matland's (1995) Typology of the Implementation Process.

	Low conflict	High conflict
Low ambiguity	Administrative implementation	Political implementation
	Focus on resources	*Focus on power*
High ambiguity	Experimental implementation	Symbolic implementation
	Focus on contextual conditions	*Focus on coalition strength*

whole in a desired direction. There is high ambiguity and low conflict in exper-
imental implementation: the goals are clear but not the means. The central prin-
ciple looks to contextual conditions as drivers of process, and outcomes result
from interplay between resources and actors present in the policy context.
Finally, symbolic implementation represents high ambiguity and high conflict.
Here, the strength of the partners or coalitions determines the outcomes.

As knowledge has grown relative to the usefulness of integrated perspec-
tives, there is still a need to figure out what influences implementation under
what circumstances and in what contexts (O'Toole 2000). Indeed, assessment
of these factors can inform the measurement of policy implementation suc-
cess. Moreover, the multiagency context in which many present-day public
and social policies are executed has shifted the research focus. O'Toole
(2000) noted that there is a new understanding that "implementation, per se,
has moved to the background, in favor of attention to concerted action across
institutional boundaries on behalf of public purpose" (p. 278). In fact,
Montjoy and O'Toole (1979) alluded to this angle early on, suggesting that
mandates often require multiple organizations work together to implement
policy. Today, there exists a great need for communication and coordination
between agencies as part of the implementation process (Bond & Gittell,
2010); thus, this concept of multiagency policy implementation is an impor-
tant area of focus as comprehensive policies continue to proliferate.

Ecology and Public Administration

Given the evolution of implementation research, particularly the assertions
that top-down and bottom-up factors may coexist in policy implementation
processes, a study of the policy context or ecological frame may expose the
indigenous influences on implementation to answer the question of why
implementation occurs in a given way. In fact, attempts to implement policy
may fail if the characteristics of the setting for the policy are not taken into
account (Lounsbury & Mitchell, 2009).

Ecology finds its origins in the study of interdependent relationships between an organism and the environmental system in which it exists (Odum, 1977). A social ecological perspective looks at the macro level to address complex, multidimensional social problems. This perspective has been used in an array of social and political contexts as a theory of explanation. The perspective is gaining prominence in fields such as psychology (ecological psychology), sociology (social ecology), and public and environmental health (human ecology; Huynh & Alderson, 2009; Janssen, Anderies, & Ostrom, 2007).

An ecological view of public administration logically assumes that people and organizational systems are influenced by the external environment because they are open systems, subject to outside influences, though reflecting a complex, interdependent relationship (Astley & Fombrun, 1983; Gaus, 1947; Riggs, 1962, 1980). A broad view of what contextual factors affect implementation is core to an ecological perspective. Ecological influences include factors such as institutional structures, resources, culture, politics, and social dynamics (Hasenfeld & Brock, 1991; Janssen et al., 2007; Wandersman et al., 1996). While a range of factors generates problems in finding a consistent set of variables that must be included in any policy analysis (see O'Toole, 1986; O'Toole, 2000), the benefit of an ecological view is that it is genuinely holistic, including both top-down and bottom-up influences (Merceier, 1994), much like the lens through which Matland sees implementation.

An expressed concern of using an ecological perspective is that it is limited in its predictive capabilities (Peng, 2008), yet the strength of such an approach lies in the fact that an ecological perspective offers a more genuine examination of the influences of the environment in a nonrecursive manner. It is well known that policy implementation does not occur in a vacuum, so analysis of such efforts must be grounded in that knowledge. In fact, Odenbaugh (2011) argues for more detailed analysis of social change asking to consider what is *lost* by excluding variables from a model rather than what is *added* by inclusion in a model. Furthermore, Drucker (1991) stated, "not only can it [social ecology] not be reductionist, by definition it deals with configurations" (p. 64). Given the need to continue to explore the influence of relevant factors, to continue to build theory that accurately reflects implementation realities, and with a return to an examination of humans and organization dynamics within their environment (Lutton, 2001; Waste, 1989), an ecological approach is important to the study of public policy implementation.

If the trail of implementation research and contemporary policy is illustrative, then the realization of public policy through multiagency channels is likely to continue into the 21st century. A focus on multiagency implementation

grounded in an ecological frame seems increasingly relevant as practitioners and researchers unpack the complexity and interconnectedness of policy within a localized context, and as collaborative solutions to modern day problems are espoused (Bond & Gittell, 2010; Daley, 2009; Hasenfeld & Brock, 1991).

Gang Violence

According to the National Youth Gang Survey, there are approximately 27,300 gangs and 788,000 gang members in this country (National Gang Center, 2009). Gangs tend to be concentrated in urban areas but, in the last two decades, have spread to suburban communities (National Gang Center, 2009). Gang involvement is of grave concern to practitioners and researchers as research shows that individuals involved in gangs commit more crime than those unattached to gangs (i.e., Esbensen, Winfree, He, & Taylor, 2001). Furthermore, as a whole, gangs tend to commit more crime and more serious crime than nongang groups (Miller, 1990). The reasons for joining gangs are complex and result from the intersection of many factors, which can be broken into five ecological domains of youths' lives: individual, peer, family, school, and community (Howell & Egley, 2005).

Because gangs appear in diverse areas of the country and because reasons for joining gangs vary, there is growing recognition that communities must take a more holistic approach to gang responses. Gang problems are increasingly seen as important to tackle in a comprehensive way, targeting those five domains of the lives of youth (Howell & Egley, 2005). In turn, national and state policy initiatives have taken on this perspective.

CGM

The CGM is the product of research conducted by Spergel in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which was prompted by an increasing concern over the proliferation of gangs and the ancillary problems of youth violence in urban cities. The research showed that addressing gang violence was complex and that a comprehensive approach was needed (Spergel, 1995). As a result of a pilot study and several demonstration projects, a promising framework for tackling gang-related crime and a useful resource for communities across the nation has developed into the CGM (Howell, 2009). The CGM includes five strategies to be adopted as part of a community's approach to gang violence (Spergel, 1995). The five strategies are community mobilization, opportunities provision, social intervention, suppression, and organizational change and development.

Community mobilization involves local citizens, former gang members, and community organizations coordinating prevention and intervention programs within and across communities. Opportunities provision includes specific education, training, and employment opportunities for gang-involved youth, while social intervention involves preventive initiatives by organizations, schools, and criminal justice agencies aimed at youth and their families at risk of gang membership. Suppression is the formal and informal social control of gang youth to stop them from acting out gang behaviors. Finally, organizational change and development involves the development and implementation of policies that result in better coordinated services and best use of resources to reduce gangs and gang violence.

The CGM has become one of the most recognized and resourced strategies for addressing gang violence (Klein & Maxson, 2006); however, there is little research on how and why communities implement the model in a certain way. The model itself is vague on implementation processes, which raises the question of how communities and local policymakers are implementing the model and what they need to know to effectively implement it. There is a need to reconcile best practices with a "flexible" implementation framework for this specific policy. The CGM represents the increased promotion of best practices and the mandate for such initiatives from funders, without clear implementation guidelines. A comparison of the implementation of these best practices against Matland's typology is interesting, given that policy ambiguity is core to this best practice policy, and according to Matland, the level of ambiguity will affect implementation.

Method

This study used a multimethod approach to answer the questions of how and why implementation occurred as it did across three urban areas over a 4-year period. Various methods within an action research approach were used to describe, understand, and explain the implementation of this comprehensive policy. In action research arrangements, practitioners and researchers benefit from timely information gathering, analysis, and feedback in an attempt to implement meaningful strategies (Bargal, Gold, & Lewin, 1992). Action research methods are effective at uncovering the ecological context in which policy implementation exists as researchers work alongside practitioners to address the problems. Researchers are more connected to the dynamics of context in this way than through traditional methods (Lewin, 1946). The use of action research in the study of policy implementation is gaining ground (Mischen & Sinclair, 2009), and these methods are seen as particularly germane to the complex challenges of public safety policy (Braga, Kennedy, Waring, & Piehl, 2001).

Background

Research Sites. The research sites, Cities A, B, and C, were selected based on access to individuals and data through LARPs. Each city received funds for the years 2006 to 2010 to implement the CGM policy. Cities defined their own community collaborative, where the number of partners ranged from 4 agencies to as many as 17. In each city, there was a lead administrative agency, as well as a number of partners who competed for a portion of the overall grant. What resulted was a collection of agencies, or the "administrative structure," by which the policy initiative came to life (Hjern & Porter, 1981).

As detailed in Table 2, these cities are ethnically and economically diverse and are representative of the types of urban areas that may adopt and benefit from a comprehensive antigang strategy. Cities A and B are midsize cities, whereas City C is a small city. City C took a regional approach and collaborated with two other small cities to implement the initiative. In this case, most of the grant and policy-related resources were devoted to City C, as that was where the main problems with gang violence occurred. Over the 4-year period, resource and fiscal constraints concentrated almost all of the grant resources in City C; thus, it alone was the focus of this study. All cities have poverty, unemployment, and violent crime rates well above the state average, with educational achievement levels below the state average.

Data Collected

Researchers served as LARPs in two locations (Cities B and C) since grant inception and after 1 year of implementation in the third location (City A). Thus, over the 3- to 4-year period, researchers observed a range of partner meetings and events and had unfettered access to documents, individuals, and archival data. Multiple sources of data supported efforts to validate observations and explanations used in this study, including participant observation, document reviews, focus groups, interviews, and informal discussions with project partners.

Observational data were collected via monthly and quarterly partnership meetings (i.e., subcommittee and steering committee meetings; $n = 79$ for City A, $n = 70$ for City B, and $n = 19$ for City C[2]), and community forums and outreach activities ($n = 12$ for City A, $n = 1$ for City B, and $n = 8$ for City C). Document reviews served as vital source of information. These documents included yearly grant applications ($n = 11$), quarterly reports of strategy goals, objectives and outcomes, strategy implementation reports ($n = 6$ for City A, $n = 15$ for City B, and $n = 14$ for City C), meeting minutes[3] ($n = 79$ for

Table 2. Site Demographic Comparison.

Indicator	City A	City B	City C	State
Population	>150,000	>100,000	<50,000	6,497,967
Families below poverty	23%	16%	15%	7%
Unemployment	11%	11%	11%	8.4%
GED or above	76%	78%	81%	93%
Ethnicity	41% White	63% White	59% White	79% White
	35% Hispanic	18% Asian	15% Hispanic	8% Hispanic
	21% Black	16% Hispanic	4% Black	6% Black
Violent crime rate (per 1,000 people)	15	9	9	<1

Source: Data gathered from the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (2008).
Note: GED = Graduate Equivalency Degree. Populations have been left vague to mask city identification.

City A, $n = 70$ for City B, and $n = 16$ for City C), and work products such as new administrative and referral tools ($n = 2$ for City A, $n = 4$ for City B, and $n = 4$ for City C). Case studies were written each year for two of the three sites ($n = 5$).

In addition, researchers conducted interviews and focus groups with partners, which included criminal justice and local government officials, social service providers, employment and training staff, faith-based agency representatives, residents, and other stakeholders who were involved in the implementation of the CGM ($n = 59$ for City A, $n = 25$ for City B, and $n = 25$ for City C). Finally, researchers were in regular weekly or biweekly contact with various partners in each city facilitating informal, but invaluable discussions about the policy initiative.

Analytical Approach

Qualitative analysis techniques were used to reflect on the myriad of data collected, identify themes and patterns within and across research sites, and to compare observations with existing research. To answer Research Question 1, "How has implementation of the CGM varied across three urban cities in the same state?" the research involved analyses of grant applications, quarterly reports of strategy goals, objectives and outcomes, strategy implementation reports, meeting agenda and minutes, case studies, and work products, such as new administrative and referral tools. In each site, there

were specific gang problems and strategies emphasized depending on local needs. Specific implementation strategies and approaches were captured and organized according to research site and the CGM strategy areas. This resulted in a snapshot of how each city implemented the CGM policy.

These strategies were driven by the ecological constitution of the community. To analyze Research Question 2, "Why has implementation of the CGM varied across three urban cities in the same state?" analyses of meeting notes and minutes, quarterly reports, and other research reports were conducted to identify patterns and themes relative to Matland's typology. Interview data, observations, and data collected through conversations were analyzed and coded for patterns and themes within each site and then compared. The data were compared with Matland's typologies to identify whether and in what ways the local data fit the model.

Results

Research Question 1: How Each City Implemented the CGM

Table 3 shows how CGM strategy was operationalized in each city given local needs.

Similarities. Although each city's problem orientation differed, there were similarities in the types of strategies selected, particularly with regard to social intervention, opportunities provision, and suppression. These methods are most familiar to agencies dealing with violence, and more is known about these strategies than for the strategies of organizational change and community mobilization (Braga & Bond, 2008). In fact, it may be that organizational change and community mobilization are more complex and difficult to implement (Andrews, Cameron, & Harris, 2008), and thus may be implemented in vastly different ways.

In terms of prevention, service providers such as Boys and Girls Clubs and community centers offered programming to fill the after-school and summer voids with recreational and tutoring services. Providers also engaged youth in a mentoring process and/or assisted them in goal setting, once these youth visited recreational activities. As one Boys and Girls Club staff member in City A stated, "The hook is the recreation activities we provide and the food to get them through the door. Once they're there, we can work on the other stuff."

Each of the three sites documented the importance of streetworkers (also known as street outreach) to at-risk and known gang members in their grant applications, provided funds to outreach agencies to implement services, and

Table 3. CGM Strategy Implementation.

CGM strategy	City A	City B	City C
Community mobilization	Community awareness	Parent awareness	Community involvement
Social intervention	School programs (after school and summer)	School programs (after school and summer)	School programs (during, after school, and summer)
Opportunities provision	Streetworker program	Streetworker program	Streetworker program
	GED and job training	Alternative school Truancy initiatives	Therapy Truancy initiatives
Suppression	Crime hot spots Gang patrol	Crime hot spots Gang patrol	Crime hot spots
Organizational change and development	Gang assessment instrument	Policymaker advisory board	Learning communities

Note: CGM = Comprehensive Gang Model; GED = Graduate Equivalency Degree.

pointed to their success. In City C, for example, as a result of an outreach worker's mediation of a situation between gang members and his request for enhanced police presence, a retaliatory drive-by shooting was avoided. An integral part of each city's strategy was to use hot spot policing, wherein high-crime areas were patrolled more frequently during the high-crime times to better address youth and gang violence. These commitments are memorialized in grant applications, meeting minutes, and budget expenditures.

Differences. There were notable differences across the cities, with regard to how they mobilized the community and operationalized organizational change and development. Based on the evidence, community mobilization efforts were generally superficial and somewhat shallow in Cities A and B. Community mobilization strategies varied from canvassing neighborhoods to inform residents of services offered by initiative partners (City A) to utilizing community agencies as proxies for citizen engagement (City B), to engaging the wider community in the process of creating and giving input on youth policy and justice procedures (City C). For example, City A used community engagements to reach out and educate the community on gangs and city resources. Using a door-to-door approach, partners canvassed neighborhoods and passed out leaflets. In the case of City B, efforts to connect with parents were more engaging. Parental outreach took many forms including workshops, use of

automated technologies, and better caseworker–family relationships. However, these attempts were fragmented and not part of a more comprehensive mobilization strategy.

Cities implemented the organizational change domain in interesting ways. City A created a gang assessment instrument to assist partners in ensuring they were all discussing the same target population, facilitate the youth referral process, document their work, and track their progress. City B chose to facilitate a monthly advisory board consisting of policymakers from a host of stakeholders, including city government, schools, and public safety. City C adopted an approach for the organizational change and development strategy as well as the community mobilization strategy that would address long-term changes in how organizations interact within and among each other by creating learning communities (Senge, 1990), complete with trainings on how to create and sustain the endeavor (see Gebo, Boyes-Watson, & Pinto-Wilson, 2010).

Research Question 2: Why Implementation Varied

Researchers examined the most influential variables in the implementation of the CGM policy in each site. An ecological perspective helps to explain the adaptation of specific strategies in each of these cities. In effect, it seemed critical to first understand the dynamics of the implementing environment and what factors were at play before attempting to "type" the implementation process according to Matland (1995). Social ecology variables were grounded in research from the implementation and social ecology literatures (Hjern & Porter, 1981; Janssen, Anderies, & Ostrom, 2006; Matland, 1995; Maynard-Moody, Musheno, & Palumbo, 1990; Montjoy & O'Toole, 1979). Influential variables first were grouped into three broad categories.

Local actors represent the various public, private, and nonprofit agencies' involvement in implementation, but also include local officials, active citizens, or other individuals who may affect or are affected by implementation (Hjern & Porter, 1981; Maynard-Moody et al., 1990), which seems particularly thorny in a multiagency, collaborative context (O'Toole, 2000). A second category, *historical factors*, represents past or historical relationships and/or dynamics that are often based on race, culture, or economics (Hasenfeld & Brock, 1991). The last category of factors is *political factors*, which include the dynamics of power and influence among and/or between individuals, groups, or organizations (Hasenfeld & Brock, 1991; Matland, 1995; Maynard-Moody et al., 1990) as well as the level of autonomy of various organizations or actors relative to decision making (Hjern & Porter, 1981). Table 4 indicates which factors had the most influence in the implementation of the CGM.

Table 4. Comparison of Most Influential Factors Across Sites.

Research site	City A	City B	City C
Most important factor	Political	Historical	Local actors
Second most important factor	Historical	Local actors	Historical

Resources and demographics also are sometimes used in ecological analyses. Resources include such things as economic resources (Hipp, 2010). Demographic influences include factors such as ethnicity, age, and gender of residents (Hipp, 2010). These two categories of factors were not the prime movers in policy implementation across these cities. Instead, local actors, history, and politics were the most influential factors.

City A. The most influential variables in City A were political factors and historical factors. In this city, power and history created more of a top-down approach to CGM implementation. Here, resources and decision making were centralized among a small group of power brokers. Politically, City A has a very powerful mayoral office, where much decision-making power rests. The mayor's office wields final say over which community and government agencies get funding and for how much. Although this is a multiagency collaborative where not all agencies fall under the same authority, compliance is sought and gained via access to grant funds.

Historically, City A has experienced significant racial conflict. In the case of implementation of the CGM, the collaborative seemed separated along racial lines. Racial tension was sometimes overt in partner meetings where agency representatives of color have on at least two occasions stormed out because they felt as though the process or discussion had racial undertones. One agency representative, a woman of color, stated in an interview, "This is supposed to be a comprehensive community initiative, but no matter which way you cut it, it is still the White man's ball game." As a result of the divide between minority partners and majority decision makers, most partners did not trust each other or the partnership, though survey results from the 3rd year showed that some community partners were more likely to collaborate on projects and make referrals to each other over the 4-year grant period. This has facilitated stronger relationships between the community partners even in the politically lopsided environment.

This intersection of politics and history in City A was most obvious in the distribution of funding. Recall that each city had a lead agency (usually a local government entity) with service agencies competing for a portion of the CGM funds. Two years of researcher-initiated interviews with project partners

revealed that the majority of partners felt that there were problems with decision making and distrust reflective of the political and historical issues. For example, in the 3rd-year distribution of grant funds, a diverse group of respected community leaders came together to review program proposals from interested agencies. The committee examined and discussed the applications, the success of previous grant efforts from these applicant agencies, and the way in which their proposed services would help achieve CGM implementation. Funding recommendations were then provided to the mayor.

During the decision process, two highly publicized incidents of police brutality against minorities occurred. This also happened during an election year. When funding decisions came down from the mayor's office, funding was not aligned with committee recommendations. This was viewed as a political power play. One upset partner went so far as to say that the decisions were meant to be "hush money" to vocal community agencies that were outraged by the events. This example illustrates the political power facets of the policy process, but also reveals symbolic implementation at play in City A where it is "business as usual."

The city is poor, by any measure, and though partners often overtly stated resources as the reason for things not getting done, the reality was that every year of the grant, most partner agencies still had unexpended funds remaining close to the end of the grant period and needed to "spend down" their funds. Resources, though discussed by partners, seemed not to be the major impediment to getting things done. Furthermore, although key local actors could easily be identified, and many of them were interviewed for the case study, these actors did not hold the power in important decision making, which was relegated to the mayor's office.

City B. City B data suggested that history and local actors were responsible for the way in which CGM policy was implemented. Unlike the previous presentation of City A, City B enjoys a long history of collaborative, community problem solving around a variety of community challenges. When the funding for implementation of the CGM was first announced, the city had already been engaged in a citywide strategic planning process relative to youth and gang violence, spearheaded by the city government and the police department and involving hundreds of community partners and residents. There was already a commitment by local actors (e.g., policymakers, service providers, community stakeholders) to identify and confront gang violence. The process already underway set a tone that while the city and police were facilitating the process, other agencies that were equally recognized as necessary to solve the problems stepped forward. Here, the establishment of an advisory board, through the strategic planning process, and the police department's success in facilitating

collaborative public safety initiatives in the past created a workable administrative structure by which the CGM would come to life. The advisory board has met monthly since grant inception and has tackled policy issues at the local and state levels, as well as advocated in the legislature for continued funding.

As a result of this groundwork, the implementation of the CGM became a natural outgrowth of work already in progress. Thus, conflicts about the goals of the policy initiative were nonexistent, and there was accepted comfort in how the city would implement the model. There is a mutual understanding and respect for the suppression, prevention, and intervention aspects of gang violence, thus the selection of activities was primarily unproblematic. Partners gathered on a regular basis to review gang activity and discuss the elements of the city's strategy. In City B, one advisory board member noted that the CGM initiative has made an impact because it "brings together a wide cross section of city, state, and regional people to plan, assess, and development better responses to issues." As the gang problem evolved over time, goals and activities reflected current or emerging needs. Even as funds were reduced in the uncertain economic environment, partners still worked together to provide services and to leverage other funds and resources. As a result of the CGM work, partners in each of the sites established or strengthened relationships with other agencies that contend with issues of gangs. The current research revealed that history of collaboration and local actors were the most influential contextual factors in the implementation of the CGM in this city.

City C. Local actors and historical factors were the two most influential variables in City C. Prior to grant inception, a new police chief took the helm who was concerned about the growing community divide between those who had resided in the historically White city for a long period of time and non-White, particularly Latino, newcomers. The police chief engaged in conversations with non-White community leaders to address the problem. A young Latina, who was well respected in the community, gave the chief entrée to the wider Latino community. Concomitantly, at the start of the grant, the local newspaper depicted the drug and violence problems in the region as the result of the newly arrived Latinos. There also were race problems between the primarily White police force and the newcomers. Together, the police chief and the Latina spearheaded the effort to reshape how the drug and violence problems, and the root causes of them, were addressed. They contracted with a regional university to build learning communities of diverse people (e.g., public and private businesses, schools, police, community members) to come up with a shared vision of a gang-reduction initiative. These local actors were able to combat historical, largely racial forces, as well as political pressure from the well-connected newspaper to further the collective goal of providing

Table 5. Site Assessment Against Matland's Typology of Policy Implementation.

	Low goal conflict	High goal conflict
Low level of policy ambiguity	Administrative implementation	Political implementation (City A)
High level of policy ambiguity	Experimental implementation (Cities B and C)	Symbolic implementation (City A)

positive experiences, role models, and safe places for the youth of the city (Gebo et al., 2010). As a result of the partnership and long-term nature of implementation, 80% of partners said they had a better relationship with other agencies and were better positioned to partner on gang-reduction activities, and in some cases did partner, as a result of funding. This had formed the basis of the initial grant and operating strategies of the CGM thereafter.

The above ecological assessment is important to positioning these cities in Matland's typology as they help to explain why the CGM strategies were implemented in a specific way and they reveal how contextual dynamics influence implementation. Building on this ecological review, Matland's typology is used to illuminate how clarity of policy goals relates to policy implementation across the different cities. Table 5 shows Cities B and C in the "experimental implementation" quadrant wherein there were few conflicts about policy goals. The ambiguity of the CGM policy and the flexibility in the funder's mandates allowed for local adaptation and orientation to the gang problem. City A, conversely, was more of a hybrid implementation site, where political and symbolic implementation of the policy overlapped. In City A, the policy process fluctuated in terms of high and low conflict.

Summary and Discussion

The research shows that these three cities mirrored each other in a number of ways, particularly in the use of after-school and recreational opportunities, street outreach, and in the targeting of crime and/or gang hot spots. The adoption of these similar strategies may be explained by the expanding reach of best practice strategies and mounting evidence in addressing localized violence (Decker, 2003). The cities emphasized different elements of the CGM and selected more divergent and sometimes superficial approaches to CGM community mobilization and organizational change strategies, though these components are as critical to successful implementation (Gebo et al., 2010; Spergel, Wa, & Sosa, 2003).

What seems empirically enlightening in the current study is uncovering the ecological factors as guides of tailored adoption of policy. Implementation of the CGM in each city was influenced by contextual factors such as the interplay between local actors, political, and historical elements of the collaborative. In turn, these factors were most relevant to the way in which the policy was carried out by actors and/or groups. In City A, the research shed light on the influence of politics and history as the strongest weights on the implementation process. In this case, the culture of power and politics combined with the history of distrust and centralized decision making overpowered collaborative implementation, despite attempts to have a stronger, grassroots decision process take hold. Implementation in Cities B and C was primarily influenced by history and local actors. The strength of these factors was a facilitator of collaboration and implementation in these cities rather than an inhibitor as seen in City A. These results suggest that a thorough consideration and understanding of the ecological dimensions of the local environment is needed to fully comprehend how and why policy is implemented (Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1981).

The identification and specification of these variables are necessary first steps in moving to the categorization of implementation as offered by Matland (1995). Moreover, results suggest contextual variables are relevant to the each domain of Matland's typology, not just in an experimental implementation environment. deLeon and deLeon (2002) offer a note of reinforcement regarding policy implementation and the importance of the micro environment, suggesting that "one size never fits all, context matters, and that when we face extremely complex conditions, we are better off if we try to understand the particular issues than if we propose some form of generic metatheory" (p. 489).

This finding is informative for those interested in best practices research generally and gang research more specifically. Local actors were left to figure out on their own how to implement the CGM policy in their own backyards. From the perspective of policymakers and local practitioners, contextual assessments seem critical to the adoption of best practices policy. This lesson reaffirms the complex, localized influences on goal identification and attainment (Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1981), which impacts how policymakers and practitioners go about policy implementation; and it certainly impacts comparative policy studies. Moreover, the measurement of policy implementation success (Ryan, 1995; Treno, 2010) will be informed by an understanding of the contextual dynamics surrounding implementation.

Importantly, this research focused on the process and implementation context rather than policy outcomes. This long-term examination of process and context represents what many researchers say might be needed to affect the multiple

dimensions of gang activity, as well as other collaborative, multiagency efforts (Daley, 2009). This in turn would inform successes, which is a valuable question for future research.

This research also makes a unique contribution to the methodological dimensions of implementation research as it validates the use of action research in capturing and understanding policy implementation over a significant period of time. The use of action research to study the implementation of the CGM across the three cities over a 4-year period facilitated in-depth investigation, the uncovering of ecological dimensions, and discourse in a way that would not be possible in large sample studies. O'Toole (2000) contends that large-scale, quantitative studies are needed to advance implementation research, with case study methods providing limited elucidation to existent literature. Clearly, there is a need for more large quantitative studies; however, as seen here, comparative case study methodology using action research provides a richness of detail that illuminates policy implementation in a way that cannot be captured by such projects. Although the study focused on cities in one state, and thus generalizability may be limited, by using a comparative approach, and by collecting and triangulating data from a variety of sources over time, the data revealed a powerful and consistent picture of the nature and influence of interactions between the policy and the environment.

Finally, the study took place within a complex multiagency collaborative, a growing phenomenon in the public arena (Bond & Gittell, 2010). This is a critical distinction as collaborative policy contexts include "a world of multiple institutional actors—more than one government, agency or sector—whose cooperation and perhaps coordination are needed for implementation success" (O'Toole 2000, p. 266). Policy implementation in a multiagency context adds a level of complexity given the importance of ecological conditions (Gittell & Weiss, 2004; Himmelman, 2001).

When best practices are promulgated with vague directives, success seems better defined after a deliberate assessment of the implementation context. This idea creates challenges for policymakers, researchers and practitioners looking to successfully implement and measure policy locally. Future research may explore the effect of this adoption-experimentation approach on outcomes of interest and use action research as a way to capture the unique idiosyncrasies of diverse implementation environments. This may be where the most valuable best practices lessons are found.

Authors' Note

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. When referencing the Comprehensive Gang Model (CGM), the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) characterizes the model using the term *promising* practice, reinforcing its potential as a definitive best practice but recognizing the scarcity of outcome evaluation and the complexity of implementing comprehensive and collaborative strategies (Howell, 2009).
2. City C did not begin regular meetings until the 3rd year of implementation, which accounts for the low *n*.
3. Although partners typically met monthly, there were occasions when meetings were canceled or postponed.

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