

Beyond the Eras: A Micro-Strain Framework for Modern Policing Challenges

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Policing in the United States has developed through several major eras, each redefining the mission and expectations of police agencies. Early American policing grew out of the English watch system and expanded into a broad set of responsibilities—patrol, emergency response, investigations, community engagement, and interagency coordination—far beyond narrow law enforcement alone. The Political Era was marked by strong ties between police and local politicians, often producing corruption and uneven service (Kelling & Moore, 1988). The Reform Era attempted to professionalize policing through centralized leadership and standardized training. Yet the Kansas City Preventive Patrol Experiment showed that changing patrol levels did not significantly affect crime or public fear (Kelling et al., 1974).

The Community Era shifted policing toward neighborhood partnerships and long-term problem solving, influenced by Broken Windows theory (Wilson & Kelling, 1982). After 9/11, the Homeland Security Era emphasized intelligence gathering, data analysis, and cross-agency collaboration (Burke et al., 2019). Goldstein's problem-oriented policing model highlighted the need for systematic analysis to address complex threats (Goldstein, 1979). These eras point toward a more scientific, interdisciplinary approach to public safety. Modern criminologists can help organizations understand risk, design prevention strategies, and anticipate emerging threats. This model also reduces pressure on police departments, which face expanding responsibilities without matching resources. Research shows these demands contribute to burnout and long-term staff loss (McCarty, Zhao, & Garland, 2007). A unified, intelligence-driven, cross-sector approach can strengthen prevention and improve responses to modern threats.

Modern Policing and Community Stability

Policing today involves much more than responding to emergencies. Police officers contribute to public safety by gathering information, preventing problems before they escalate, and working with community members to keep neighborhoods stable. Their role includes monitoring crime patterns, supporting local organizations, and helping small businesses maintain safe environments. When officers understand how communities function, they can intervene early and reduce the conditions that allow crime to grow.

In my practice, we use four indicators of organizational micro-strain to detect early warning signs of instability: normalization of deviance, guardianship erosion, legitimacy decline, and boundary failure. These indicators show when a workplace or community is drifting away from healthy norms. For example, when employees ignore small rules or customers stop reporting suspicious behavior, these “flickers” can grow into larger problems. Police departments in the Homeland Security Era learned that early detection through intelligence and data is essential. The same logic applies to small businesses.

Two effective policing strategies that support this work are community policing and problem-oriented policing. Community policing builds relationships between officers and residents, which increases trust and strengthens guardianship. When officers know business owners and regular customers, they can respond more effectively to concerns. Problem-oriented policing, introduced by Goldstein (1979), encourages officers to look beyond individual incidents and address underlying causes. Both strategies help stabilize neighborhoods and reduce long-term crime.

The overall relationship between police and the communities they serve is shaped by trust, communication, and shared responsibility. When police are transparent, consistent, and responsive, communities feel supported. When communication breaks down or officers appear disconnected, legitimacy decline occurs. This affects everything from public cooperation to jury participation. Mixed-methods governance—using surveys, interviews, and community meetings—helps rebuild trust by combining data with human insight. Building trust and cooperation is essential because crime prevention depends on capable guardianship. Routine Activity Theory explains that crime occurs when a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian come together (Eck, 1994). Small businesses strengthen guardianship by reporting incidents, improving surveillance, and maintaining strong relationships with police. This reduces the dark figure of crime—incidents that go unreported.

However, several challenges affect police-community relations. One major issue is boundary failure, which happens when outside pressures—such as misinformation, political influence, or economic stress—begin shaping internal operations. Another challenge is unequal resource distribution, which can make minority-owned businesses feel overlooked. Public opinion, social media, and high-profile incidents can also damage trust quickly. A key recommendation for improvement is strengthening communication channels between police and small businesses. Regular check-ins, shared data dashboards, and community safety workshops help owners understand what is happening in their area and how to respond. Research on organizational failures shows that when communication is weak, problems grow unnoticed (Holtfreter, 2005).

Police officers today also face pressing ethical and legal challenges. These include navigating new technologies, handling digital surveillance responsibly, and avoiding overreach

when laws are unclear. Officers must balance public safety with civil rights, which can be difficult in fast-moving situations. These challenges affect performance by increasing stress, complicating decision-making, and requiring constant training. A policing model that blends the Community Era, Homeland Security Era, and intelligence-driven practices can help stabilize agencies facing rapid change. When police, businesses, and residents work together, communities become safer, more informed, and more resilient.

Conclusion

The findings of this paper show that the future of public safety depends on combining lessons from all major policing eras rather than replacing one with another. Rising organizational strain, the growing role of small businesses, and the expanding influence of technology all indicate a shift toward intelligence-driven, Homeland Security-style practices, but the professionalism of the Reform Era and the shared-responsibility mindset of the Community Era remain essential foundations. The Anatomy of the Flicker demonstrates that micro-strains—such as normalized rule-breaking, weakened guardianship, declining trust, and outside pressures—serve as early warning signs of instability. When recognized early, these flickers allow criminologists and community partners to intervene before problems escalate. This approach also supports communities that have historically lacked resources and equips small businesses to detect emerging threats, including those that appear in digital environments. Overall, these findings highlight the need for early detection, shared responsibility, and cross-sector collaboration to build safer, more resilient communities.

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