

# *Problem Oriented Policing and Organisational Form: Lessons From a Victorian Experiment†*

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## **Introduction**

Pioneering work by Goldstein (1979, 1990), Eck and Spelman (1987) and others has ensured that much contemporary debate about police reform has revolved around the idea of shifting away from reactive, incident-driven techniques toward more 'problem oriented' approaches. Problem oriented policing radically reconceptualises some of the chronic dilemmas in law enforcement: the high workloads and the 'revolving door' effect whereby problems addressed one day seem to reappear before the next is out. By aiming to identify and solve problems rather than simply responding to incidents it offers the possibility of permanent reductions in social disorder. However, concentrating on problem oriented policing as a law enforcement *technology* can draw attention away from the way in which current incident driven policing is intrinsically related to organisational structures and cultures. This paper uses a case study — of an attempt to develop a problem oriented approach to drug law enforcement in Victoria — to illustrate the way in which policing styles are inextricably bound to organisational forms. It argues that unlike true technologies — such as cars, radios or dispatching systems — one style of policing cannot simply be replaced by another without attention also being given to the fundamental organisational processes that shape and orient the agency and its staff. To this end, the first section of the paper reviews problem oriented policing both as it was originally conceived and as it has been implemented by some police agencies. Our contention that drug law enforcement should be a prime target for implementation of a problem oriented approach is outlined

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† This paper discusses two major research projects: a review of Australian drug law enforcement for the National Police Research Unit (NPRU) and studies with the Victoria Police Drug Squad aimed at identifying and collating indicators on illicit drug use and harm. Both projects were funded as part of the National Drug Strategy. The authors thank the funding body (the Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services) as well as Chief Superintendent Bob Hamdorf (Director, NPRU) and Chief Inspector John McKoy (Head, Victoria Police Drug Squad) for their organisations' significant and unflinching support on both projects. The extensive work of other researchers on the projects, most notably Steve James, Ingrid Purnell and Steve Wallace, also is warmly acknowledged. An early version of this paper was presented at a conference on problem oriented policing convened by the School of Justice Studies, Griffith University, in June 1996. Feedback from other participants, in particular Professor Herman Goldstein, is gratefully acknowledged. Views expressed in this paper are, of course, those of the authors alone. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to either author, Department of Criminology, University of Melbourne, Parkville 3052, Australia.

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next, and a overview of our case-study project, a collaboration between Melbourne University's Department of Criminology and the Victoria Police Drug Squad follows. Reflecting upon this project, we identified two principal barriers to the implementation of problem oriented policing in large organisations. We then review impacts of organisational culture and organisational structure upon police practices and, specifically, the way in which these features of police organisation hamper attempts to develop novel responses to crime. We conclude by arguing that common depictions of the problem oriented approach tend to be over-optimistic about the capacity of police organisations to shift away from traditional response-based models of policing and that, in concert with developments such as problem oriented policing, fundamental changes in both culture and organisational structure need to occur.

### **Problem oriented policing**

For Herman Goldstein, originator of the term, the key to problem oriented policing lies in a fundamental reassessment of ideas about police professionalism. Goldstein argues that traditionally, concepts of police professionalism have been tied closely to tighter controls over police discretion, streamlined organisational structures, pinpointed responsibility and more efficient use of personnel and technology (Goldstein 1979). He acknowledges that reforms in the 1960s and 1970s which were based on traditional ideas generated some major benefits, both in the United States and in Australia, with individual officers becoming much more aware of the need to act lawfully and without bias. For Goldstein, however, definitions of professionalism which stop short at preoccupation with internal procedures and controls also seem to overly restrict officers' abilities both to use their own time effectively and to tap resources for law enforcement and for crime prevention latent in communities. At the worst extreme, over-emphasis on controls can result in officers' following procedures blindly, making decisions on the basis of limited information and simply reacting to events after they have occurred.

Problem-oriented approaches to policing are based on new notions of professionalism which can allow a way out of this bind. For Goldstein, the starting point has to be recognition that analysis of dispatch logs and other workload information for enforcement agencies in most Western industrialised countries invariably reveals that a very high percentage of calls for police assistance in any given region are interrelated: they stem from the same locations, the same families, the same groups of offenders and so on (see, for example, Farrell 1995; Farrell & Pease 1993; Genn 1988). However police who are incident driven rarely make the connections and identify the clusters of underlying problems that are generating high percentages of calls. No matter how professional in the traditional sense, reactive 'rule driven' police are unlikely to possess the resources, the initiative or the confidence to confront such problems and devise solutions.

Problem oriented strategies endeavour systematically to develop the professional skills which will enable operational police to identify and appropriately address the underlying factors which make some locations crime 'hot spots' and which lead to repeated calls for assistance. Such strategies recognise that in the course of their work, rank and file police will acquire extensive local knowledge and networks that can and should be utilised for order maintenance and crime prevention. Problem oriented models encourage them to recognise and draw on these resources, and to acknowledge the value of data from outside their agencies as well as from within.

Application of problem oriented approaches generally involves four steps: scanning; analysis; response; and assessment (Clarke 1992; Eck & Spelman 1987). In the scanning

phase issues for attention are identified and decisions made about which of these constitute a problem. Then follows analysis, which includes detailed documentation of the nature of problems and their potential causes. In the response phase, relevant information is used to develop and implement solutions. The effectiveness of these solutions is reviewed in the final, assessment phase.

Advocates of problem oriented policing readily acknowledge that there is 'nothing new' about police using information to respond to issues in imaginative ways (Goldstein 1990). After all, this is the essence of detective work and has long provided the rationale for the formation of task forces and the initiation of special operations. The unique aspect with problem oriented policing, however, is that all officers — not just the specialists — are trained in and encouraged to employ these techniques routinely. Problem identification and solving become matters for grassroots, operational officers rather than being initiated and controlled from the top — a significant challenge for police departments which have tended to adopt top-down 'command' philosophies.

Various attempts have been made to translate the problem oriented philosophy into practice. One of the more successful was by the Newport News Police Department in Virginia (United States). Newport News, a relatively small agency, initiated a service wide trial from 1984 to 1986. Emphasis was on ensuring that personnel at all levels would be involved. Staff received intensive training in the problem oriented philosophy, and were instructed in ways to scan for problems, analyse relevant data, determine appropriate responses and assess effectiveness. Personnel then were assigned to teams, with supervisors assigned to review progress with each team at critical phases. A detailed 'problem analysis guide' was developed to assist staff in applying the new approach, and significant success was claimed in identifying and reducing the incidence of a range of problems. These included: break and enters in a high crime housing estate; robberies in the central business district; and thefts from motor vehicles in some car parks (for details, see Eck & Spelman 1987). Subsequently, problem solving has become a component in the community policing strategies employed by a number of agencies including the London Metropolitan Police, the Alberta (Canada) police service, and forces in the United States cities of Madison, Baltimore, New York, Los Angeles and Houston (see Goldstein 1990).

Problem oriented policing has been less popular in Australia, however. South Australia's Police Department initiated a trial in the early 1990s (see Lyon 1991), but this was discontinued when the state's Crime Prevention Unit declined further funding. Queensland's Criminal Justice Commission recently has been exploring the feasibility of problem oriented approaches for that state (see, for example, Queensland Criminal Justice Commission 1996).

## **Australian drug law enforcement and problem oriented policing**

Drug law enforcement seems, however, to provide excellent opportunities for reviving the problem oriented approach and applying it in Australian contexts. For more than a decade, national, state and territory government approaches have endorsed the principle that policies toward both licit and illicit drugs should put emphasis on 'harm reduction'. The essence of harm reduction is that priority should be not so much on prohibiting drug use per se, but on minimising adverse consequences for users and communities. For proscribed substances such as heroin, amphetamines and cocaine this means that typical law enforcement reactions — for example, arresting dealers, seizing drugs, suppressing drug trading and consumption — are justified only if they can be shown to have helped minimise negative health, social and economic consequences which can be associated with production,

distribution and use (see Victorian Premier's Drug Advisory Council 1996:59). Such consequences can include overdoses, HIV and hepatitis C infections among intravenous users, and petty theft, aggressive street dealing, breaking and entering and other crimes by drug-dependent individuals in need of finances.

By definition, acceptance and endorsement of harm reduction by the law enforcement sector seems to entail some commitment to a problem oriented approach. To be able to adhere to these principles it would seem inevitable that agencies must put in place systems to monitor, at the local level, patterns of illicit drug availability and use, patterns of substance-related problems and the impacts that enforcement activities may be having on them. A national review for the National Police Research Unit by one of the present authors and a colleague (Sutton & James 1996) demonstrated, however, that this has not been the case. Systematic interviews throughout Australia with personnel occupying management, operational and senior policy positions in dedicated drug law enforcement bodies (for example, the state drug squads) and with representatives of key national agencies such as the Australian Federal Police and the National Crime Authority reveal that both individually and collectively, agencies have limited capacity to take stock of problems and tailor strategies and tactics accordingly. Most agencies claim they are dedicated to pursuing the 'Mr Bigs' of the drug trade, but are unable to furnish evidence of success in doing so. While some information is being collected on illicit drug availability and use, enforcement bodies have shown little interest in employing these data and intelligence on drug related harms systematically to guide and monitor operations (see also Weatherburn & Lind 1995).

Recommendations from the national study of Sutton and James (1996) were aimed at rectifying this anomaly. The final report acknowledged that targeting 'Mr Bigs' was likely to remain a political and moral imperative for drug law enforcement. However it argued that agencies should not pursue this objective individually and in isolation, but in the context of agreed definitions and criteria for determining which organisations and individuals should receive priority. Even more importantly, state and territory forces should give much greater attention to working in collaboration with regional detectives, non-specialist police, health personnel and relevant community based groups to develop, implement and monitor impacts of local policies. Drug squads and equivalent units should work in collaboration with regional police, health and other personnel to establish and maintain a range of indicators on the availability of illicit drugs (price, purity and the 'search time' an average user would require to make a purchase), and on associated problems (for example, rates of hepatitis C infection, overdose and of offences which may be drug-related). In essence, the national review recommended that in the drug law enforcement sphere at least, traditional, intelligence-driven 'reactive' approaches be replaced with problem oriented strategies more consistent with harm reduction philosophy. Quite quickly, these recommendations received independent endorsement from the Victoria Police Drug Squad, which had its own concerns about the adequacy of information systems. After discussions with the researchers, the Drug Squad sought a National Drug Strategy grant to help establish a drug indicators system, to be developed with assistance from the researchers. The scene appeared to be set for introduction of a more 'problem oriented' approach toward drug law enforcement in at least one state.

## **The Victorian initiative**

The basic objective of the project undertaken with the Victoria Police Drug Squad was to help the Squad develop a working model of a rational, data driven (or problem oriented) approach to drug law enforcement. Specific aims were: to identify and collate the many sources of data on illegal drug use in Victoria; to evaluate these sources in respect of the

nature and reliability of the information they provided; to examine novel methodologies for generating drug use data; and, finally, to recommend models for ongoing data collections on illegal drug use in the state. In the event, the assessment of novel methodologies was given lower priority because a similar project was initiated at about the same time by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre at the University of New South Wales (see Hando et al 1996). The remaining three aims — to identify key data sources, to ascertain their utility to law enforcement decision making and to recommend how they ought to be collected and used — thus provided the focus of the project.

Under a reasonably lenient set of criteria concerning data quality, the regularity with which data were collected and the accessibility of collections to outside agencies such as Victoria Police, a total of 27 regular sources of data on illicit drug use in Victoria were identified (Purnell & Brown 1995). The nature of these sources varied widely, ranging from the Victoria Police's own crime statistics to coroner's data collected by the Victorian Institute of Forensic Pathology and treatment agency data collected by the Department of Health and Community Services. The factor holding these disparate sources together was that all could shed some light upon the nature, extent and patterns of drug use. What was quickly realised, however, was that while identifying data sources might have been a relatively straightforward (albeit time consuming) task, devising ways of collating these data and integrating them in a meaningful way into law enforcement activities would be far more complex. This, in a sense, was the key challenge facing the drug indicators project: to find a way of bringing together law enforcers' natural interest in intelligence with harm reduction's emphasis on problem identification and solution.

The first and more general element of this task was for police and researchers to pinpoint those specific dimensions of drug use that should be of most relevance to the policing task. This included specifying what particular sorts of drug consumption should be considered most important (for example, recreational versus problematic), what types of data might be necessary to provide an adequate view of each dimension of drug use and how these data should be fitted together. Equally important, however, was a second element: developing a model of the ways in which knowledge about trends and patterns in drug use, and about the effects of drug use upon individuals and the community, could be utilised by law enforcers. Without such a model decision makers at all levels in the police organisation, from policy development to street level policing, would have neither the capacity nor the incentive to understand how their efforts affected the levels, patterns or impacts of illicit drug use. In this sense, then, the task of evaluating and selecting data sources for inclusion in a drug use monitoring system were twofold, involving conceptualisation not only of the important issues surrounding drug use but also of ways in which the phenomenon of drug use could be related, in a programmatic way, to the activities of law enforcement. The need for a clear understanding of how various policing activities were directed toward particular aspects of drug use, and how they could in turn be influenced by the feedback from a drug use monitoring system, was repeatedly emphasised as a defining feature of the rational law enforcement system toward which this project was directed.

This notion, that drug use indicators ought to be harnessed to a set of rational organisational procedures, produced the first point of tension between the two parties to this project. As criminologists, we felt obliged on both practical and moral grounds to work toward a system in which we felt data would be used 'properly'. The moral aspect of this concern was that, as criminologists, we ought not involve ourselves in making law enforcers more efficient in practices that we viewed as potentially harmful and markedly inconsistent with the harm reduction philosophy of the National Drug Strategy (see Brown et al 1997; James & Sutton 1996). We also considered it inappropriate to be involved in tasks where the only likely purpose to which the results would be put was political or resource lobbying.

On a practical level, our concern was that data ought to be located within an organisational structure that explicitly accommodated drug use information and provided mechanisms to review organisational performance and direction. We had no reason to believe that simply 'having data around' would lead to its rational or consistent use, or that data placed within this kind of organisational context would be likely have any significant effect upon enforcement practices. There was a real possibility that law enforcers' historical concentration upon operational data — that is, on information of immediate tactical value such as where high purity powder drugs are currently available or where overdoses appear to be located — might make it difficult for them to abandon practices that had to date shown little evidence of effectiveness and to shift toward a more strategic view of the drug use problem. As criminological consultants, as distinct from what might be termed research technicians, we felt ourselves obliged to tie development of the drug use monitoring system to a defensible organisational model of data use. This 'package' would, if set in place, move the Victoria Police Drug Squad forward toward problem oriented policing practices more in line with harm reduction principles, and position it at the head of Australian drug law enforcement.

As this process moved forward we became increasingly aware that notions of organisational rationality and strategic planning could, to those not familiar with them, seem highly academic and, indeed, ultimately superfluous to the core task of drug law enforcement. To deal with this problem, and translate the criminological themes underlying our work into a concrete form, we developed two conceptual frames for viewing the practice of drug law enforcement. The first of these was a model of strategic planning and development tailored specifically to the policing task. This model attempted to describe the strategic task facing organisations and the manner in which strategic data are necessary to move an organisation toward its goals. In working papers we emphasised that strategic data need to be linked to specific issues or decisions in the same way as operational data and decisions are conjoined and that it was important always to assess whether, and to what extent, any operational activity was helping the organisation achieve its strategic goals. Operational strategies should be justified not on the basis of their historical legitimacy or preferences for specific work styles (both, apparently, key legitimators of current law enforcement strategies), but on the basis of their capacity to produce demonstrable progression toward agreed strategic goals (for example, harm minimisation). The concept of planning horizons was offered as a way of developing a perspective on ways strategic goals might be achieved, and as a way of making operational strategy more responsive to impact and evaluation data (Brown 1995; see also, Kelly 1994; Steiss 1985).

Our second conceptual framework built on these ideas of strategic planning and goals, but tried to relate them to a discussion of organisational history and change. Given the tendency toward inertia in large organisations such as Victoria Police, we thought it useful to link our arguments for problem oriented approaches to a broader schema that dealt with the progress a police organisation might make as it moved toward the structures we proposed. Drawing upon Weber's notion of ideal types (see Bendix 1977:271–274), our working paper sketched out the idea of a 'rationality continuum' for police organisations through time. Two endpoint anchors provided images: first of what drug law enforcement had looked like in the past; and second what it might ideally look like in the future — in a sense, a contrast between the dystopian and utopian. Between these poles of rationality were placed two other 'states' of drug law enforcement: the first represented what was felt to be the current state of practice following the first phase of the project, while the second provided an image of what, logically, the next phase should aim toward. In this way, police managers were presented with a conceptual scheme — the idea of rationality in drug law enforcement — that could be seen to underlie historical developments in policing.

Current practice could thus be located upon both conceptual and practical continua. At any point in the historical development of policing, the rationality of enforcement practices could be implied from the underlying conceptual dimension. Moving forward to the next phase of the project would require change to occur within the Victoria Police Drug Squad, setting in place the internal organisational structures (such as a strategic planning framework) that would provide more rational and, following the logic of our model, more appropriate ways of using information on illegal drug use.

Ultimately, however, this approach failed to be persuasive. Our reports proved useful to our clients, and they formed the basis of successful submissions for additional resources for data collection and analysis within the Victoria Police and also in the state bureaucracy. Yet despite our best intentions, and commitment to the project by the Victoria Police Drug Squad, the model of a problem oriented approach to drug law enforcement we advocated for in Victoria failed to take hold. Nonetheless, analysis of obstacles encountered in this research can be instructive and provide what we believe to be important insights into the problem oriented policing model. Importantly, the questions raised by our analysis relate not so much to the *logic* of problem oriented policing and the models of rational decision making we pursued, but rather to the assumptions they make about police organisations. In particular, the two main platforms of our reassessment of the Victorian experience concern assumptions made about organisational culture and organisational structure in the police department and the extent to which these features of the organisation work against a problem oriented approach.

## Organisational culture

Much good research has been undertaken on police culture and the various problems it poses for management wishing to change the shape or direction of police activity (for example, James and Warren 1995). Often, however, much of this research has tended to focus upon aspects of the thinking among line staff and the capacity for this culture rather than managerial directive to influence the nature of police activity. When considering organisational change that requires whole-of-organisation shifts in thinking, the scope or extent of what might be termed 'problematic' cultural understandings and practices can be seen to reach into the highest levels of management. This was found to be the case in Victoria. Here a problem oriented view of drug law enforcement required senior management to fundamentally reassess traditional tasks and strategies and to set in place structures and mechanisms that would make new modes of operation possible. Two examples may serve to illustrate the ways in which strong cultural forces hampered this process.

### *Incident-driven planning*

The problem oriented model of police activity requires that traditional incident-driven responses to crime be replaced with an analytical and solution-driven approach that locates criminal events within their wider social milieu. This focus upon setting and the factors which may cause or facilitate crime demands a number of changes in planning of police activity. Among these changes is the prominence given to problem analysis and the collection of data on aspects of the designated problem.

At the outset of the Victorian study this new way of approaching drug law enforcement had received broad acceptance from police managers. In practice, however, police found little incentive to think about data in an analytical, problem oriented, fashion. Data collected for the purposes of problem analysis tended to be screened for its relevance to tactical, response-driven, planning and activity. The notion that data could be collected but not

'used' — that is, not implying or flowing into some immediate form of enforcement activity — presented a major challenge to the established culture of police work. Consistent with these cultural practices, there remained a tendency for problem-descriptive data — for example, information from paramedics about where administrations of the narcotic cancelling drug NARCAN had been made — to be viewed as valuable mainly for its potential to improve or streamline established response strategies. Clearly, if a full picture of the extent and harms associated with drug use is to be obtained it is essential that those outside the enforcement sphere who are in a position to provide data feel assured they can do so without bringing a police 'tactical response' down upon their clients. In Victoria, this was not achieved.

### *Interpreting data*

Effective analysis of data relating to crime problems requires an interpretive framework: a model that specifies how different types of information or different trends ought to be interpreted. In particular, a good analytic framework conjoins data with decisions or responses. Police managers acculturated to the response-driven pattern of activity tend to hold intuitive models that link in a reasonably simple fashion certain kinds of data — such as intelligence about the location of criminal activity — with appropriate response-based enforcement strategies. Moving to more complex analyses of crime, such as those produced under a problem oriented approach, creates the need for more complex understandings of ways data bear upon crime problems and how these data should be interpreted. Importantly, such analyses must move the emphasis of attention away from simple operational responses towards more strategic views of problem contexts and the range of possible solution strategies.

This change of focus can be experienced by police managers as quite a cultural leap. As the transparency of decisions increases, or as the issue of what a decision 'is' can be more precisely defined, the preceding issues of what information is relevant, how it is used and how it can be collected or generated become clearer. In Victoria, the tenacity of the grip that operational modes of interpretation have over police managers' thinking emerged as a major feature of the project. Attempts were made to set in place a model of strategic decision making which would link problem analysis to the development of policy and the generation of various possible courses of action. The idea was that activities would be justified on the basis of demonstrable effectiveness in achieving goals rather than simple preference or historical precedent. However, just as managers found difficulty with the idea that problem identification and solution would largely replace response-based planning, rather than operate as an adjunct to it, so too they found it difficult to conceive of an approach to crime that relegated traditional policing activity to just one among a range of possible police strategies, each of which would be required to demonstrate effectiveness.

### **Organisational structure**

Cultural mores within police organisations are in many ways born of and supported by organisational structures. A recurrent theme in critiques of police organisations is their hierarchical and paramilitary nature (Auten 1985; Jefferson 1990). Yet police departments have managed to combine these highly rigid arrangements among their members with very loose controls over the relationship between individual members and the public. In effect, police culture develops in an environment paradoxically characterised by high levels of individual discretion in the exercise of police power, but very little scope for changing the broader focus of police activity.



The significance of these structural arrangements for problem oriented policing cannot be overestimated. There are at least two aspects of police structure that ought to be highlighted here. Following from the issue of discretion, the first aspect concerns the capacity of different nodes in a police structure to formally reshape or vary the nature of their activities. At a broader level, the second concerns the overall shape of the organisation and the way in which it is explicitly structured around the task demands of response-based policing.

### ***Reshaping activity***

The typical structure of police departments, characterised as they are by rigid lines of accountability on the one hand and significant individual discretion on the other, produces a situation where significant authority resides mainly at two points in the organisation — in the discretion of individual officers on the street, and in the power of most senior management who set organisational direction. Between these points lies a highly circumscribed structure of authority within which officers often have very little legitimate scope to determine either what is done or the way in which it will be done.

In the Victorian study this meant that the Drug Squad, situated as it was as a node in the middle of the organisational structure, seemed to have almost no capacity to *significantly* alter its activity. The sorts of innovative responses to drug use that would flow out of a problem analysis were solutions that the Drug Squad seemed not, on its own, to have the authority to invoke. Problem oriented responses to drug trafficking and use were impeded not only by a cultural difficulty in understanding how they could be related to the policing task but also by a basic lack of authority among relevant managers to independently develop innovative but legitimate responses to serious, substantive, issues of policy and practice.

The extent to which even a relatively powerful and autonomous group such as the Drug Squad was held in check by organisational power structures highlights an important and contestable assumption which seems to pervade much of the literature on problem oriented policing. Although not always explicitly stated, problem oriented models seem to assume and rely upon significant degrees of organisational flexibility: flexibility that is not routinely available to many decision makers in the police organisation. Perhaps the reason why this issue has not come to the fore in reports of problem oriented projects is that they tend to have been set up in relatively small agencies (such as Newport News) or as special-case demonstration projects located on the functional periphery of large organisations. When, as in the Victorian project, attempts are made to reorient a large and fundamental component of a large police organisation, the real lack of authority and flexibility available to that node of the organisation rapidly becomes apparent.

### ***Response-based structure***

The powerful forces which act to align all parts of the police organisation, and which work against novel problem oriented approaches, demonstrate the way in which police organisational structure has grown around the requirements of response-based law enforcement. In our view, police organisational structure is not *neutral* in relation to police activities, but is itself *part of* that mode of operation. Current organisational structure both reflects a certain mode of policing and also acts to support and maintain that approach.

Structures of power and authority, and the associated tendency over time for key decision making points within police bureaucracies to have been located in ways which aim solely at optimising the capacity of incident-driven responses, in fact are antagonistic to other ways of responding to social harm. The structure of many large scale police organisations is therefore explicitly not one designed to accommodate or to serve problem oriented activity.

Nor is it a structure designed to, or immediately capable of, adopting or learning new types of responses. Because the response-based focus of traditional policing has been a whole-of-organisation approach, there is typically little facility in the organisational structure for multiple analyses of what the crime problem actually is and, correspondingly, for multiple strategies to address these problems (see also Sutton 1996).

Viewed in this light, the failure of one Australian police organisation to support fundamental revisions of its purpose seems unremarkable. Like other systems, organisations tend to sustain and regenerate themselves and to have developed a range of mechanisms to ward off challenges. Such mechanisms normally appear as one of two responses. The 'hard' response is to quickly crush or stifle a threat. In the case of drug law enforcement in Victoria this sort of response was clearly demonstrated in strong opposition by the Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police to recent suggestions contained in the Pennington Report (Victorian Premier's Drug Advisory Council 1996) that the law governing minor marijuana possession and use offences be amended. A potentially more effective defence mechanism, however, is the 'soft' response of cooption. Under this strategy an organisation entertains a new and potentially threatening notion, but in such a way that the threat is effectively neutralised. This neutralisation may be achieved either by turning the new approach to the extent that its original focus is lost, or by allocating it an insignificant, distant and marginal place in the organisation.

Both of these strategies can be seen in responses by some police departments to the problem oriented model. By adopting the rhetoric of problem oriented policing while relegating problem oriented strategies to peripheral or demonstration-style projects, police departments can at once both accommodate and marginalise the threat to response-based modes of policing and the organisational structure that supports this activity.

## Conclusions

This paper commenced with an outline of our understanding of Goldstein's (1979, 1990) concept of problem oriented policing. In particular, we emphasised the way in which Goldstein's problem oriented approach was conceived as a model of police reform: as a way for police to step away from the inefficient work practices that reactive, incident-driven policing had produced. For Goldstein, problem oriented policing was thus directly concerned with police professionalism and, by implication, was linked with reform of police organisational structures and cultures — an issue of direct concern for this paper.

If this was the original message of problem oriented policing — that in order for law enforcement to move ahead it must fundamentally review its organisation and practices — then in Australia the message does not appear to have been understood. If our experience is any guide, Australian conceptions of the problem oriented model are that it is a technology of policing that can be added to police organisations as they pursue the continuing goal of modernisation. Much in the same way that new dispatch technologies supplement or replace old, so too problem oriented policing has tended to be viewed as a new technique that can be grafted on to the side of existing operational strategies. Remarkably, no police department in Australia appears to have seen an inconsistency in embracing the problem oriented model as a new technique or technology but giving no attention to the organisational structures and cultures within which it is meant to be embedded.

Drug law enforcement is perhaps a classic example of an area of policing directly amenable to a 'pure' problem oriented approach (in the sense of the approach originally conceived by Goldstein). Not only are the wider social processes which contribute to law enforcement problems reasonably transparent, but all Australian police departments are

formally committed to responding to drug issues under the (problem oriented) harm minimisation framework of the National Drug Strategy. The Victorian project described here attempted to take a step toward these new drug law enforcement philosophies by working with the Victoria Police Drug Squad to develop the data systems needed to support problem identification and analysis. Reasons for the project faltering can be traced directly to the issues identified by Goldstein in his description of problem oriented policing: the need to think about problem identification and solution as new tasks requiring new notions of professionalism, new forms of organisation and new modes of practice tend not to have been recognised as an integral part of the problem oriented package.

Retracing the path of the Victorian experiment and asking why putting data systems and strategies for appropriate analysis and response in place proved so difficult, it is important to consider the scope of the task and the size of the organisation in which it was attempted. One of the most salient features of the problem oriented policing literature is that still there are relatively few examples of successful large scale exercises (see, for example, Hoare et al 1984). Problem oriented policing seems to have been relegated to the world of small agencies and demonstration projects. Here it may be worth reflecting back upon the notion of cooption as an organisational strategy for marginalising threats or challenges to traditional modes of operation. While our pessimism may be premature, it seems at this stage that both problem oriented policing and harm minimisation approaches to illicit drugs may become classic examples of threats that are brought into the fold. Both philosophies are assented to in theory by strategic and corporate planners, only to be tucked away at the periphery of law enforcement activity. Departments are ready and willing to respond to the demands for structural and cultural change when a project involves half a dozen staff in the corner of a region, but when a large organisation such as the Victoria Police sees a significant section of core operations such as drug law enforcement coming under threat of 'reorientation' to a problem focused approach, the rigidities of the bureaucracy ensure that the threat is smothered.

In summarising what we have learned about putting in place large scale problem oriented projects, this last point concerning the power and inertia of bureaucracy seems to be most important. The experience here leads inexorably to the conclusion that if meaningful change in important sectors of a large organisation is to occur then the project must have the understanding and imprimatur both of the Commissioner and of key political forces, and that both must be committed to directing and driving the quite fundamental changes that reorganisation requires. Our experience has shown that isolating one section of a large organisation and attempting to reorient its goals and activities is a strategy with a high likelihood of failure. In retrospect, this conclusion might seem unremarkable, yet police organisations are typically broken into relatively independent sections, such as the Drug Squad, and these groups do sometimes appear to enjoy quite remarkable degrees of autonomy. It is not until such a section is challenged to step outside the bounds of conventional thinking and practice that the very real limitations within which it works are revealed.

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