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CPD community policing efforts have not built trust, cut crime, Northwestern study finds

Researchers say the department has failed to embrace or devote enough officers to community-based efforts.

By Andy Grimm and Sophie Sherry | May 23, 2023, 7:24pm CDT

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Commander of Community Policing Angel Novalez speaks during a press conference at the 10th District Police Station in Lawndale in 2020. A report by Northwestern researchers found that CPD has done little to reduce crime or increase community engagement — largely because officers assigned to the initiative are re-deployed to fill staff shortages. | Pat Nabong/Sun-Times

In the nearly four years since the Chicago Police Department launched its Neighborhood Policing Initiative, the program has fallen short of its goal of

strengthening CPD's relationship with the community — and reducing crime, a Northwestern University report states.

CPD launched the initiative in partnership with NYU Law School researchers in 2019, after the department came under the oversight of a court-appointed monitor, which called for better engagement with the community. A team of experts from New York University's Policing Project were to work with a team of officers whose time was to be dedicated to positive interactions with residents in small areas of the city, focused on "problem-solving" rather than responding to 911 calls or patrolling.

But as the pilot program expanded from one district to 10, the study authors found CPD has often taken those officers out of neighborhoods and assigned them to patrol or special details as a result of staffing shortfalls. The result has been frustration for "community ambassadors" who volunteer to work with the often-absent community officers, and no apparent impact on crime levels or community trust in officers, according to the report by Northwestern's CORNERS initiative. CPD has announced that the program will expand to all 22 districts by the end of 2023.

"Despite the best efforts and intentions of individuals close to the project — within CPD, the Policing Project, CNPI communities, and the City of Chicago — the work of this relatively small group has understandably not overcome the barriers presented by a department that has struggled to commit to full implementation of CNPI as a department-wide community policing strategy," the report states.

On Tuesday, panelists at a City Club luncheon discussion on community policing voiced similar disappointment with the department's approach to community policing.

Mecole Jordan-McBride, advocacy director for NYU School of Law's Policing Project, said the department assigns too few officers to dedicated community policing roles and that the department has failed to convince officers across the department to

believe in the program's problem-solving, relationship-based approach.

"The more often that we say community policing is over here, every other officer is over here, we are signaling ... that this is a subset of what we do and that everyone else does the real police work," Jordan-McBride said. "When the reality is that policing with the community is the work (and) it is driving public safety outcomes."

"What we haven't done right is really embrace this idea of the officers, maintaining the integrity of their geographic assignment, and actually working with the community to build relationships, before we even get to May" when violence in the city begins a seasonal surge, and the department reverts to "heavy policing."

The report states that the CNPI officers reported spending as much as 80% of their time filling in for beat officers on patrol, often far from the small sectors of the city that are their assigned neighborhood policing areas.

Speaking to the City Club audience, Robert Boik, who was fired from his post as head of the CPD division responsible for complying with the federal monitors' requirements, agreed with the report.

"How the police are structured matters a lot," Boik said. CPD is "really all over the place in terms of structure right now. ... We've got to get to the root of what the consent decree requires, which really, I think, lays out a pretty clear path for how we build those relationships."