

USA

China Studies US to Revamp Police Force

June 05, 2012 10:00 AM [Matthew Hilburn](#)



Chinese police wait for the arrival of delegates for a session of the National People's Congress outside the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China, March 11, 2012.

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China is spending more than ever before in an attempt to upgrade its domestic police force, but it may also be seeking to change its approach to law enforcement by looking to the United States for ideas.

U.S. law enforcement officials and experts who have advised China on its police force say Beijing is looking to update an antiquated system plagued by outdated crime reporting methods, outmoded equipment and vehicles and a lack of trust with the people.

“They're really trying to make a professional police force as opposed to just hiring someone, giving them a uniform and putting them in the neighborhood and saying ‘defend the party,’” said Sergeant Erik Branson of the Metropolitan Police Department in Washington, D.C., who has been to China to speak with law enforcement officials there about U.S. tactics.

Branson said Chinese Embassy officials approached him after seeing an article about his role in helping clean up a crime and drug-infested park in Washington.

China's police force is highly centralized and not divided along local, state and federal levels as it is in the United States. In China, the Ministry of Public Security is responsible for day-to-day law enforcement. But Branson said the officials he spoke with were less interested in the federal system and more interested in local policing, like how he patrolled on a bicycle and developed good relations with members of the community who, in turn, served as his “eyes and ears” on the ground.

“The focus is on local because that's where the problems are with corruption and insurrection,” Branson said, adding that they want to become more professionalized by

learning how American police patrol, how they interact with the community and how they deal with the mass media.

Exchange students

One way Chinese police are learning is by immersing themselves in the U.S. system. For the past three years, roughly 15 elite students from China's prestigious Zhejiang Police College in Hangzhou, China have studied criminal justice for an entire year at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas. (see video)

Video courtesy Dr. Phil Lyons of Sam Houston State University

Vincent Webb, dean and director of the university's prestigious college of criminal justice, said such an exchange is telling.

“I think there's a lot more concern about civil disorder in China than I ever thought,” he said. “I think there's a growing recognition that policing is going to have to involve the community as stakeholders in a variety of decisions, problem identification and development of solutions. Public safety is a two-way street. If you're always going out with riot gear, you're going to have to have a lot more police.”

Webb's observations are borne out in statistics. The number of what the Chinese government calls “mass incidents” has risen from less than 10,000 in 1993, to about 90,000 in 2010,

according to Chinese government-backed studies. The number of these public gatherings, which officials fear could disrupt social stability, may even be higher, but Beijing stopped publishing statistics in recent years.

These have been fuelled by citizens who are increasingly frustrated with corruption and abuse of power by local officials.

Both Branson and Webb said the Chinese police may be realizing they have to build trust with the people if they want to maintain order, and that means developing partnerships with citizens to solve and prevent crime.

Community policing

Community policing, which focuses on building those very kinds of partnerships, was widely used in the U.S. during the late 1990s, but has taken a backseat in some areas as law enforcement has focused more on homeland security in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Dennis Bowman, a professor at the School of Law Enforcement and Justice Administration at Western Illinois University, said he thinks community policing is a good fit for China.

“Conceptually, the model is appealing to them in my view,” he said. “But we have no knowledge as to the elements of [community policing] that particularly interest them.”

Bowman added that for China to “do it truly, it has to be a more democratic style of

government” because of the emphasis the approach places on decentralization and the active participation of the citizens.

The U.S.-approach to community policing likely would run into barriers in China when it comes to communication and transparency. The government tightly controls the media and tries to restrict public discussion of unrest.

“They can only take it so far,” Bowman said.

But they’re interested in hearing ideas.

Lucy Caldwell, a spokeswoman with the Fairfax County Police Department in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., was recently invited to speak at the International Forum on Police and Media in Hangzhou. She said the Chinese participants were interested in learning the basic tools her department uses to communicate with the public, how to build trust and credibility and how to show empathy with the people.

“The public must know that you care before they care what you know,” she said.

Cultural divide

The Chinese exchange students at Sam Houston State University are getting a first-hand look at this approach. As a part of their studies, the students spend a week with the police departments of nearby League City or Alvin, Texas. During that time, they live with American

police families and ride along in police cruisers, witnessing frontline law enforcement, as well as life off duty.

“In keeping with the notion of community engagement, I thought it made sense to connect these students to the community so they can see American policing from the inside of a police car,” said Phillip Lyons, a professor at Sam Houston State University.

Crystal Ye, who is about to finish her year at the university, said she takes her role seriously.

“In my opinion [being a] police officer is an honorable job,” she said. “It's an integral part of a mature society.”

Ye said she was impressed with the amount of high tech equipment and statistics used by U.S. law enforcement officers, adding that a similar approach could be used in China.

Some things didn't translate, though. Ye said she was surprised to see that American officers carried guns, saying that it's illegal for citizens to carry weapons in China, so there's no need for police to carry them. Also, she said many Chinese police do not have the authority to make arrests.

Lyons said that he instructs Chinese students who are shadowing a U.S. officer during an arrest to stay in the car until it is safe to come out.

“We explained that sometimes people don't like police intervening, and we told them they may shout or yell,” he said. “One of the students asked, ‘Do they ever use bad language?’ I

told him 'Yes,' and he asked, 'Is that when you shoot them?' It's the wild west to them."

Lyons said when he asked one student what surprised them most about American police, the answer was "the power you have."

"That really struck me as backwards," he said. "Here's someone from the PRC [People's Republic of China] talking about the power of the American police."

However, there have been recent examples of just how much power Chinese police have when it suits local government officials.

Human rights groups have criticized Chinese police and security forces in recent months following revelations of a harsh anti-crime crackdown in Chongqing under disgraced Communist Party leader Bo Xilai, and the extrajudicial detention of blind activist Chen Guangcheng. These incidents have renewed calls from China's top leadership to clean up corruption and impunity at the local level.

Servants of law and order?

While Beijing's interest in community policing and communicating more with citizens is clear, the extent to which China will implement the U.S. lessons remains a mystery.

Phelim Kine of Human Rights Watch said Beijing likely will be putting its own spin on the Western system. He said China may be looking to resurrect a model from its Maoist past, the

so-called neighborhood committees.

The committees, Kine said, were basically the communist party's "boots on the ground and eyes and ears looking for troublemakers and outsiders...looking for anti-revolutionary elements."

Kine said they were revitalized during the 2008 Beijing Olympics because they were seen as valuable maintaining order during a time when the spotlight was on China.

"It's an old model that, like Frankenstein, has been brought back to life," he said.

The Chinese Embassy in Washington said in a statement that both China and the U.S. had achieved "positive results" with exchange visits, joint investigations, intelligence sharing and law enforcement training.

"Sending exchange students between law enforcement training academies of the two countries to learn from each other advanced policing philosophy and tactics will help enhance mutual understanding and trust, deepen pragmatic cooperation and promote sustained and sound development of cooperative relations between China and U.S. in the field of law enforcement," said the statement.

But Kine is skeptical about what China may be learning from the West.

"One of the things that we've noted with alarm is that Chinese security services look to best practices in Western countries to essentially build a better mousetrap," said Kine. "It's to

bolster the regime rather than to bring real law enforcement to China. The police are controlled by the state. They are not the impartial arbiters and servants of law and order.”

The Chinese Embassy did not respond to Kine’s assertion, despite repeated attempts seeking comment.

Your opinion

This forum has been closed.

All comments (1)



Chief David Couper (United States)

June 06, 2012 1:52 PM

If China is really interested in learning how to transform and improve police, police leaders need to take a look at my new book, "Arrested Development: A Veteran Police Chief Sounds Off About Protest, Racism, Corruption and the Seven Steps Necessary to Improve Our Nation’s Police." And visit my blog "ImprovingPolice" at Wordpress.com.

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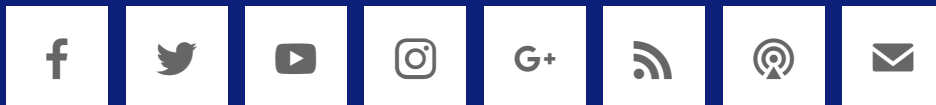
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