

The SAGE Dictionary of Policing

Compstat

Contributors: Alison Wakefield & Jenny Fleming

Editors: Alison Wakefield & Jenny Fleming

Book Title: The SAGE Dictionary of Policing

Chapter Title: "Compstat"

Pub. Date: 2009

Access Date: December 09, 2014

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications Ltd

City: London

Print ISBN: 9781412930994

Online ISBN: 9781446269053

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446269053.n17>

Print pages: 50-53

©2009 SAGE Publications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

This PDF has been generated from SAGE knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446269053.n17>

Definition

Compstat (alternative spellings COMPSTAT, ComStat, CompStat) refers to the policies, practices, systems and organizational structures subsumed by a revolutionary police management paradigm first developed and implemented by the New York Police Department (NYPD, US) in 1994 during the administration of Police Commissioner William J. Bratton. Although numerous authors have stated that Compstat stands for 'Computer Statistics', 'Compare Statistics' or other terms, they are incorrect. 'COMPSTAT' was simply the name of a computer directory where COMPSTAT's original programmer stored documents, rudimentary databases and computer files related to the process.

[p. 50 ↓]

Distinctive Features

A key element of Compstat's operation is its operationalization of the 'broken windows theory' articulated by James Q. Wilson and George Kelling (1982). The theory holds that the minor crimes and 'quality of life' offences police often overlook or fail to enforce are in themselves criminogenic, and the incidence of 'serious' crimes including murder, robbery, rape, burglary, felony assault and vehicle theft can be dramatically reduced through the vigorous enforcement of 'quality of life' offence statutes. As in other jurisdictions where Compstat management systems are utilized, police enforcement activities in New York City focus on such 'minor' crimes as public intoxication, loitering, panhandling, prostitution, noise violations and other quality of life offences as well as on 'serious' felony crimes.

Compstat's utility as a crime control and accountability process is built around four primary 'Principles of Crime Reduction':

- (1). timely and accurate crime intelligence
- (2). effective crime control strategies and tactics

- (3). rapid deployment of personnel and other resources; and
- (4). relentless follow-up and assessment of results.

In the US context, these principles are operationalized at regularly scheduled Crime Control Strategy Meetings (CCSM) where headquarters executives meet with field commanders to identify emerging crime patterns and trends, develop and apply effective crime reduction strategies and tactics, organize and deploy resources to support those strategies and tactics, and assess the impact of their crime reduction efforts. These intensive strategy sessions focus the attention of the agency and its personnel on crime control issues, ensure field commanders' accountability for the enhanced discretion and control of resources they are afforded, and are intended to enhance the quantity and quality of communication and interaction between executives and operational commanders.

Compstat's CCSMs are the centrepiece of the management system. Compstat makes use of technology (including computerized statistical analysis, crime mapping and Geographical Information Systems) to quickly capture and analyze current crime statistics and to use these crime intelligence data to rapidly detect emerging crime patterns and trends. Once these trends and patterns are identified, police personnel and other resources are marshalled and deployed to make use of highly-specific strategies and tactics that are worked out at the CCSM and specifically tailored to the unique patterns they are designed to address. The efficacy of these strategies and tactics is scrutinized and rigorously assessed at subsequent CCSM where, if necessary, they can be adapted or modified to enhance their effectiveness. Importantly, these crime trends and patterns are continually monitored to ensure they are successfully eliminated and do not reemerge.

The basic processes of Compstat and the CCSM also permit executives to assess the capabilities as well as the management strengths and weaknesses of field commanders, to allocate resources where they are most needed and to become conversant with the unique crime conditions and the specific needs of individual neighbourhoods and communities. Compstat processes have also been adapted and put to practice in various forms and formats throughout the agency in order to address crime and other police management functions. Compstat principles have been applied, for example, to the management of police corruption and the internal investigative

function (Henry and Campisi, 2004). Additionally, Compstat has been proposed as an effective model for the intra- and inter-agency collection and dissemination of intelligence necessary to combat terrorism (Henry, 2002).

A feature of the US Compstat process has been the emphasis on altering the department's structures, policies and practices to support a crime fighting mission, and the development of a body of strategic doctrine to harmonize the plans and approaches taken agency-wide to address crime and quality of life issues. As Henry has noted (2002), [p. 51 ↓] Compstat's full effectiveness in achieving organizational goals and objectives demands that it be implemented as an overarching management paradigm or model for management practice rather than as a programme or overlay to traditional police practice.

These features of Compstat have been discussed in the US context, however, the basic principles outlined here are the key elements of Compstat programmes elsewhere. These programmes are variously called operational performance reviews, performance outcome reviews and Corporate Management Group Performance Reviews. It should be noted that while officials from many Western democratic countries have travelled to New York to review the Compstat approach, the operations of variants of Compstat are not simply exports or transplants from the US version. Such programmes need to be adapted to local circumstances. Even in the US, as Bratton and Malinowski point out (2008: 261), 'one size does not fit all ... the process as it is played out in New York City was very different from the way it now works in Los Angeles'.

Evaluation

In New York, the Compstat management system had an immediate and dramatic impact on the NYPD's capacity to reduce crime and improve quality of life. According to Bratton and Malinowski (2008), between 1993 and 1998 New York saw a 53 per cent drop in the burglary rate, a 54 per cent drop in reported robberies and a 67 per cent drop in homicide. The Compstat paradigm has been hailed as a 'revolution'. However not all observers have been as laudatory about its potential and its role in reducing crime. While many argue that Compstat can be credited with impressive reductions in crime and improvements in neighbourhood quality of life, others are not

so positive about the 'New York miracle' (see, for example, Chilvers and Weatherburn, 2004). Others have suggested that despite its positive aspects, the process has the potential to distort performance because it fails to acknowledge the less tangible aspects of performance (Fleming and Scott, 2008). In Australia, the NSW model has been criticized by senior police as 'management by fear' and by an external consultant as being too specifically focused on crime statistics as performance indicators.

Police Commissioner Bill Bratton, who was New York's Police Commissioner in 1994 and presided over the introduction of Compstat, now works in Los Angeles. He and Malinowski have argued recently that the confrontational process of Compstat operations is not conducive to assisting 'the most under-performing commands suffering from the most complex problems'. Compstat Plus has been developed with a view to incorporating Compstat principles of inspection and accountability as well as 'the use of more in-depth auditing methods, mentorship and close collaboration' with a view to 'measuring success, inspiring success [and] turning under-performance into achievement'. As Bratton and Malinowski (2008: 263) argue:

Compstat inspections are most effective when conducted in a collaborative atmosphere that encourages discourse and respect for participants while avoiding pre-judgement and heavy-handed questioning.

As more Western democratic countries take up the potential and challenge of Compstat, we would expect to see this paradigm of the 1990s evolve positively to assist in management accountability in policing, business and the public sector.

Vincent E. Henry

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446269053.n17>

Associated Concepts:

- [accountability](#)
- [broken windows theory](#)
- [crime mapping](#)
- [intelligence-led policing](#)
- [managerialism](#)

- [performance management](#)

Key Readings

Bratton, B. and Malinowski, S. (2008) 'Police performance management in practice: taking Compstat to the next level' , in Special Issue: Performance Management, Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice , 2(3): 259–265.

Chilvers, M. and Weatherburn, D. (2004) The New South Wales 'Compstat' process: its impact on crime' , Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology , 37 (1): 22–48.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1375/acri.37.1.22>

Fleming, J. and Scott, A. (2008) 'Performance management in Australian police organizations' , in Special Issue: Performance Management, Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice , 2(3): 322–330.

Henry, V.E. (2002) The COMPSTAT Paradigm: Management Accountability in Policing, Business, and the Public Sector . Flushing, NY: Looseleaf Law.

Henry, V.E. and C.V.Campisi (2004) 'Current and future strategies for managing police corruption and integrity' in R. Muraskin, ed. and A.R. Roberts (eds) Visions for Change: Crime and Justice in the twenty-first Century (4th ed). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Wilson, J.Q. and G.L.Kelling (1982) 'Broken windows: The police and neighbourhood safety' , The Atlantic Monthly, March.