COMPSTAT AND BUREAUCRACY: A CASE STUDY OF CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE

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COMPSTAT has been heralded as an innovative and rational crime control program, but our research shows that its implementation presents police departments with a set of opportunities and challenges. Using Weber's theory of bureaucracy, we present a case study demonstrating how COMPSTAT's key elements are shaped by extant organizational arrangements. In renewing an emphasis on the crime-fighting goal and the command hierarchy of the Lowell Police Department, the study site, COMPSTAT presented an opportunity to reinforce certain traditional features of police bureaucracy. However, by strengthening control through its accountability mechanism, COMPSTAT interfered with its own

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operation. Furthermore, the persistence of other bureaucratic features—functional specialization, formalization, routine, uniformity, and secrecy—limited organizational change. Our case suggests that the most significant challenge for any department is picking the compromise between existing bureaucratic features and COMPSTAT's core elements that most suits its needs and those of its constituencies.

The age is running after innovation and all the business of the world is to be done in a new way. — Samuel Johnson to Sir William Scott (1783)

Where everything is done through the bureaucracy, nothing to which the bureaucracy is really adverse can be done at all. — John Stuart Mill (1859)

Since its implementation under Commissioner William Bratton of the New York Police Department (NYPD) in 1994, COMPSTAT\(^1\) has been recognized as a major innovation in American policing (McDonald, 2004; Silverman, 1999; Walsh, 2001). Designed to overcome organizational features long associated with bureaucratic dysfunction (Henry, 2002), police departments across the country are turning their attention to COMPSTAT as a program that combines state-of-the-art management principles with cutting-edge crime analysis and geographic systems technology (Weisburd, Mastrofski, McNally, Greenspan, & Willis, 2003). Although still relatively new, COMPSTAT has already received a great deal of national publicity (Law Enforcement News, 1997; Witkin, 1998), including a 1996 Innovations in American Policing Award, sponsored by the Ford Foundation and Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. Furthermore, its originators and proponents have credited COMPSTAT with impressive reductions in crime and improvements in neighborhood quality of life in New York City (Bratton, 1998; Silverman, 1996).

At the core of the NYPD's COMPSTAT model are four highly interrelated crime reduction principles that are designed to make police organizations rational and responsive to management direction: (1) accurate, timely information made available at all levels in the organization; (2) the selection of the most effective tactics for specific problems; (3) rapid, focused deployment of

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\(^1\) There is some disagreement about what the acronym "COMPSTAT" actually denotes. William Bratton, former Commissioner of the NYPD, suggests that it stands for "computer-statistics meetings" (1998, p. 233), but according to Silverman its name arose from "compare Stats"—a computer filename (1999, p. 98). Some argue that COMPSTAT refers to "computer comparison statistics" (http://www.nalusda.gov/pavnet/iag/cecompst.htm).
people and resources to implement those tactics; and (4) relentless follow-up and assessment to learn what happened and make subsequent tactical assessments if necessary (Bratton, 1998; Giuliani & Safir, 1998; McDonald et al., 2001). These and other elements of the COMPSTAT approach are most visibly displayed in the NYPD’s twice-weekly COMPSTAT “Crime Control Strategy Meetings,” during which precinct commanders appear before the department’s top echelon to report on crime problems in their districts and what they are doing about them.

Although it has been the object of almost unconditional admiration from politicians, practitioners, and scholars, little empirical research has been conducted on COMPSTAT. Those studies that do exist tend to be brief, rely heavily on anecdotal evidence, or concentrate on the nation’s largest, and, by any measure, most exceptional police department, the NYPD (Henry, 2002; Heskett, 1996; Silverman, 1999; McDonald et al., 2001). In an earlier study, we distributed a national survey to American police departments to provide a broader and more systematic assessment of COMPSTAT (Weisburd et al., 2003). Drawing from what those who developed COMPSTAT have written (see Bratton, 1996, 1998, 1999; Maple, 1999) as well as what those who have studied COMPSTAT have observed (McDonald et al., 2001; Kelling & Coles, 1996; Silverman, 1999; Henry, 2002), we argued that there was more to COMPSTAT than simply four crime reduction principles. In fact, we identified six key elements that have emerged as central to the development of COMPSTAT programs:

- **Mission clarification.** Top management is responsible for clarifying and exalting the core features of the department’s mission that serve as the overarching reason for the organization’s existence. Mission clarification includes a demonstration of management’s commitment, such as stating those goals in specific terms for which the organization and its leaders can be held accountable—for example, reducing crime by 10% in a year (Bratton, 1998, p. 252).

- **Internal accountability.** Operational commanders are held accountable for knowing their commands, being well acquainted with the problems in the command, and accomplishing measurable results in reducing those problems—or at least demonstrating a diligent effort to learn from that experience (Giuliani, 2002, p. 82). In short, COMPSTAT makes middle managers responsible for tackling and reducing crime, and those who fail to do so will suffer adverse career consequences such as removal from command.
• **Geographic organization of operational command.** Operational command is focused on the policing of territories, so central decision making authority in police operations is delegated to commanders with territorial responsibility (e.g., districts). Functionally differentiated units and specialists (e.g., patrol, community police officers, detectives, narcotics, vice, juvenile, traffic, etc.) are either placed under the command of the district commander, or arrangements are made to facilitate their responsiveness to the commander’s needs (Silverman, 1999, p. 85).

• **Organizational flexibility.** The organization develops the capacity and the habit of changing established routines to mobilize resources when and where they are needed for strategic application (Bratton, 1998; Henry, 2002, p. 250).

• **Data-driven analysis of problems and assessment of department’s problem-solving efforts.** Data are made available to identify and analyze problems and to track and assess the department’s response. Data are made available to all relevant personnel on a timely basis and in a readily usable format (Maple, 1999, p. 32).

• **Innovative problem-solving tactics.** Police responses are selected because they offer the best prospects of success, not because they are “what we have always done.” Innovation and experimentation are encouraged (Henry, 2001, p. 61), use of “best available knowledge” about practices is expected. Writing about the NYPD, Silverman comments that COMPSTAT is an “energizer of strikingly creative decision making at headquarters and in the field” (Silverman, 1999, pp. 123–24). In this context, police are expected to look beyond their own experiences by drawing upon knowledge gained in other departments and from innovations in theory and research about crime prevention.

Our analysis described COMPSTAT's diffusion and implementation within a framework of strategic problem solving (Weisburd et al., 2003). In comparing large police departments (more than 100 sworn police officers) that had implemented a COMPSTAT-like program with those that had not, our findings showed that COMPSTAT's elements were implemented unevenly. COMPSTAT agencies were strongest on mission clarification, internal accountability, and use of data. In contrast, COMPSTAT agencies were largely indistinguishable from non-COMPSTAT agencies on measures that gauged the other core elements. This led us to conclude that COMPSTAT, whether or not intended, reinforced the traditional control elements of the military model of
police organization (Weisburd et al., 2003, p. 448). However, this
study's survey did not provide us with a context to explain why
some elements were implemented with a higher degree than
others.

The purpose of this paper is to answer this question through
an in-depth examination of COMPSTAT's implementation in a
smaller and less extraordinary police department than the NYPD.
In contrast to our survey research, this case-oriented approach
enabled us to observe first-hand how COMPSTAT's key elements
operated in relation to existing organizational structures and to
evaluate to what degree COMPSTAT changed department
structure and routine. Furthermore, we included an additional
element that was not identified in our earlier study but is
important to the COMPSTAT process: external information
exchange. Kelling notes that the publication of the NYPD's
COMPSTAT-driven anticrime strategy "amounted to a contract
between the NYPD's leadership, its officers, and the citizens of
accountability of the police through its "transparency" (Henry,
2002, p. 306). Thus, external information exchange has two
components. First is the means of communicating information to
the public, other municipal actors and organizations (including the
press), and peers about what the department is doing and how well
it is accomplishing its mission. The second component is a
potential mechanism for outside constituents to provide
departments with input (in the way of evaluations and expressions
of needs and priorities from the community), and even for creating
consequences for performance.

According to its supporters, COMPSTAT has its own logical
integrity and works like a well-oiled machine. For example, when
former Mayor Giuliani gave his farewell address, he described
COMPSTAT as a "rational, reasonable, sensible, strategic response
to crime" (2001). But organizational structures have strong
tendencies toward inertia and new programs designed to improve
organizational performance, no matter how rational, rarely have
simple and predictable effects (Hall, 2002, pp. 46, 97). For instance,
some parts of an innovative program may have a beneficial impact
on the organization, while other parts may fail to produce the
intended changes (Starbuck and Nystrom, 1981, p. xix). Given that
"organizations rarely do exactly what they are told to do" (March,
1981, p. 563), we hoped that a case study of how COMPSTAT's
seven core elements operated would illuminate some of the specific
complexities associated with organizational change under
COMPSTAT.
Organizations take many forms, but police organizations share many of the features Max Weber attributed to the modern bureaucratic form of organization. Consequently, we apply a Weberian perspective on authority, rationality, and bureaucracy to a single police department. This provides us with an explanatory framework to assess how COMPSTAT's elements interact with existing characteristics of organizational structure to produce change. We argue that the police implementation of COMPSTAT is likely to face fundamental challenges. Those elements of COMPSTAT that corresponded with existing bureaucratic structures were most likely to have a significant impact on police organization, management, and practice; those that did not, had a much more limited effect. Moreover, rather than transforming the organization, COMPSTAT's capacity to attain organizational objectives was actually impeded by its strengthening of the command hierarchy through its accountability mechanism. To show how COMPSTAT constrained and enabled change, we begin by briefly discussing Weber's analysis of authority and its relationship to bureaucracy. Then we illustrate the interplay between these bureaucratic features and COMPSTAT's operation in one police department. Finally, we discuss the broader implications of our analysis for COMPSTAT's implementation and for explanations on organizational change more generally.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Because the writings of Max Weber identify with great precision the key features of the bureaucratic model, many of which have been adopted by modern police organizations, they provide a helpful analytical framework for understanding COMPSTAT's relationship to organizational structure. Weber was interested in the increasing rationalization of modern societies as part of his larger theoretical project examining legitimacy. By this he meant the belief systems that underlie authority relations and the administrative structures that accompany these systems (Weber, 1922/1978, pp. 212–254). In contrast to traditional and charismatic forms of authority, rational-legal authority was not based on a set of general understandings on the way that things had been done in the past, on personal ties of dependence, or on the unique qualities of individual leaders. Rather, people were willing to accept the exercise of power over them because it was legal (followed fixed and acceptable rules), was rational (not arbitrary), and was impersonal (everyone similarly situated was treated the same) (Weber, 1922/1978, pp. 217–223).
In contrast to the administrative model of traditional authority (the household) and the strictly personal model of charismatic authority, the type of administrative structure that developed in association with the rational-legal mode of authority was the bureaucracy. According to Weber, the ideal-typical bureaucratic form of organization is characterized by specific features: (1) the regular activities of the organization are distributed in a fixed way as official duties and often distributed among separate divisions ("bureaus") for the more efficient pursuit of a common goal; (2) the authority to give commands for the execution of these duties is delimited by rules; (3) offices or positions within the organization are hierarchically ordered, so there is a clear chain of command; and (4) the management of the office follows a fixed set of general rules in an attempt to ensure uniformity and consistency (Gerth & Mills, 1958, pp. 196–198). The proliferation of bureaucracy in the modern world could be explained by the fact that this form of organization was “superior to any other form in precision, in stability, in the stringency of its discipline, and in its reliability” (Weber, 1922/1978, p. 223).

Weber was aware of some of the problems of bureaucratic organizations, recognizing that because they operated according to general and systematized rules they were not well suited to deal with the specific characteristics of individual cases. As a result, bureaucracies could appear impersonal and inflexible (Weber, 1922/1978, pp. 223, 974–75). Nevertheless, he has been strongly criticized for minimizing the inefficiencies of bureaucracy and focusing on its merits, and for presenting a formal and abstract model detached from reality (Albrow, 1970, pp. 54–66). Some critics have argued that the formal specifications of bureaucratic structures can actually lead to outcomes detrimental to organizational objectives. Merton, for example, observes that strict adherence to rules can end up replacing the goals or principles that these bureaucratic means were intended to achieve. This phenomenon is captured by the familiar complaint of excessive “red tape” (1940). Similarly, functional specialization may result in the creation of sub-units whose separate goals conflict with the general purposes of the organization (Selznick, 1943). Other scholars have focused on the internal consistencies in Weber's formulation, noting that he distinguishes two bases of authority, professional expertise and hierarchical position, which may conflict with one another (Gouldner, 1954, pp. 22–23). Another important criticism centers on Weber's assumption that the structural characteristics of bureaucracy are interrelated when in fact empirical studies suggest they are highly variable (Udy, 1959; Hall, 1963).
Just like other bureaucratic organizations, police departments deviate from the Weberian ideal (Niederhoffer, 1967; Manning, 1997, pp. 96, 169–173). However, they are still characterized by rational-legal authority relations, incorporate many of the bureaucratic features identified by Weber, and demonstrate many of the shortcomings long associated with bureaucratic dysfunction (Bittner 1990, pp. 136–47; Maguire, 1997; Reiss, 1992, pp. 68–72; Walker & Katz, 2002). In fact, these features and their limitations provide the basis for a sustained critique of policing by supporters of problem-oriented and community policing. They criticize modern police organizations for placing greater emphasis on their “organization and operating methods than on the substantive outcome of their work” (Goldstein, 1979, p. 236), for creating elaborate hierarchies, for fixating on rules and regulations, and for centralizing command and control (Eck & Spelman, 1987, Sparrow et al., 1990, Trojanowicz & Bucqueroux, 1990). These bureaucratic features combine to produce inflexible organizations whose line personnel are unresponsive to their clientele (Mastrofski, 1998).

These same problems of bureaucratic dysfunction provided the impetus for William Bratton and Jack Maple, his deputy commissioner, to implement the COMPSTAT crime control model (Bratton, 1998, p. 208). First, the department had lost its focus on fighting crime. Second, central headquarters made key decisions, such as staffing and deployment, thereby preventing precinct commanders from customizing their own crime control plans. Third, middle managers had become complacent about reducing crime preferring to do what had always been done in the past, rather than focus on better ways to accomplish results. Fourth, the department was fragmented with cooperation between units hindered by red tape and turf battles. Finally, the department was “flying blind.” It had neither timely crime data necessary to promptly identify emerging crime problems and patterns, nor a way to evaluate the effectiveness of crime strategies and resource allocation (Silverman, 1999, pp. 82–99).

COMPSTAT may have been designed to change existing bureaucratic structures, but the tendency of bureaucratic organizations toward structural inertia is well documented (Merton et al., 1952; Blau & Meyer, 1957). A large number of these impediments are identified in research on organizations, including the conservative forces of history and tradition (Hannan & Freeman, 1977, p. 931), resistance from coalitions of powerful actors whose careers and vested interest are endangered or disturbed by change (Blau & Meyer, 1971, p. 34), and the constraining effects on behavior of formal rules and procedures or
informal customs (Staw, 1982). Given the difficulty of changing existing organizational structures and processes, to what extent was COMPSTAT successful?

**METHODOLOGY**

**Research Site**

Lowell is a small and modestly diverse city located in an industrialized area in the Northeast. At the time of our fieldwork (2000–2001), the Lowell Police Department had 260 sworn officers and approximately 80 civilians to serve the city's 105,167 residents, 62.5% of whom were White, 16.5% Asian, 14.0% Latino, 3.5% Black, 0.2% American Indian and 3.3% other race or two or more races (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). Based on the index crimes known to the police reported in the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports, the city's crime rate (per 100,000) had declined between 1995 and 1999 (from 6,488 to 3,257 index crimes), but recently there had been an upswing. In 2000 the crime rate had increased slightly to 3,874 index crimes per 100,000 population, and in 2001 it was up to 4,268 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1995–2002). The department had implemented COMPSTAT in late 1996 or early 1997 (respondents were unclear on the precise date), so by the time of our visit it had been in operation for 4 years.

**Data and Methods**

There were two primary reasons for selecting the Lowell Police Department as a case study: (1) its high score on our national survey indicated that it had fully implemented COMPSTAT (Weisburd et al., 2001); and (2) it had received national publicity as an innovative department (under current leadership). Because the department's COMPSTAT program had moved beyond initial problems and benefits to an equilibrium, our assessment was not based upon it being new and undeveloped (Willis, Mastrofski, Weisburd, & Greenspan, 2004). Furthermore, because the department was nationally recognized for its adoption of some of the latest innovations in police management techniques and

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2 A combination of efforts by city government, community members, and the local police resulted in Lowell winning the prestigious “1999 All-America City” award from the National Civic League in recognition of “exemplary community problem solving.” In May 2002, the chief was awarded one of only two leadership awards by the Police Executive Research Forum for his role “in bringing major changes in the department that greatly benefited the city.” In this context, COMPSTAT was recognized as “an innovative crime-tracking program” (Skruck, 2002).
strategies for the delivery of police services, we could be more confident that COMPSTAT had been implemented thoroughly and carefully.

The research design in this project was constructed to gain a comprehensive view of how COMPSTAT operated by using multiple research procedures (participant observation, in-depth interviews, a survey, and documents). We conducted intensive field research in Lowell over an 8-month period (October 2000–May 2001). During this time, a researcher observed eight biweekly COMPSTAT meetings and seven weekly operations staff meetings. In addition, we conducted 31 formal interviews with city and police department personnel: the mayor, city manager, chief, middle managers (district commanders), civilian staff, captains, lieutenants, detectives, first-line supervisors (sergeants), and patrol officers. These interviews varied in length from 30 minutes to 2 hours, with many running over the allotted time.

Immediately following the biweekly COMPSTAT meeting on a Thursday, the chief or deputy who ran the meeting was debriefed; the presenting district commander was also debriefed soon after (usually the following Monday or Tuesday). The aim of our six post-COMPSTAT debriefings (lasting approximately 15 to 20 minutes) was to help identify the main crime problems in each district and track responses to these problems over time. In addition, we administered an anonymous survey to more than 100 patrol officers to obtain their views and experiences regarding COMPSTAT. The survey was administered to patrol officers who attended roll call on the late night, day, and early night shifts, and took about 15 to 20 minutes to complete. The onsite researcher distributing the survey told officers that the study was being conducted by the Police Foundation to learn how COMPSTAT worked in their police department. The researcher noted that input from patrol officers on police programs and procedures was not always solicited, but that the Police Foundation valued any feedback that they were willing to give so that their insights into the COMPSTAT process could be gathered. Officers were advised that the survey was voluntary and responses were anonymous, that the researchers would not attempt to identify individual respondents, and that completed surveys would be maintained in a secure space at the Police Foundation, where they would be accessible only to members of the research team.

The officer in charge of the detail provided us with the department’s monthly work schedule. The 145 patrol officers in the Lowell Police Department who attended roll call were assigned to one of three groups and worked 4 days on and 2 days off. On any
given day, one group was off duty. The survey was distributed on
two separate days to reach officers from all three groups across all
three shifts. Based on our examination of the detail, we estimated
that approximately 20 officers were absent from roll call on any
given day. This left us with an approximate sample of 124 officers
from which we received 97 completed surveys, a 78% response rate.

Finally, we collected a variety of internal documents, records,
and reports that were related to the overall COMPSTAT process.
These included department descriptions of COMPSTAT,
COMPSTAT-generated crime reports, daily bulletins, and
printouts of the computer maps and data analysis generated by the
Crime Analysis Unit. We also made use of local newspaper articles
on the department's COMPSTAT program. These provided insights
into COMPSTAT's implementation and gave us a greater sense of
how it was perceived by outside constituents. These were located
using a computer search of the city newspaper's website and by
looking through the department's grant proposals and award
applications.

Overview of COMPSTAT in Lowell

As part of its transformation to community policing in 1994,
the department had decentralized geographically into three
districts under the 24-hour supervision of a district commander.
Management is structured geographically under COMPSTAT, but
COMPSTAT's implementation in Lowell went much further than
just geographic decentralization.

At COMPSTAT's inception a Crime Analysis Unit (CAU) was
formed that, at the time of our study, had grown from two to five
full-time analysts and several student interns. Its primary
responsibility was to collect and analyze crime data that were
presented at the department's biweekly COMPSTAT meetings.
Because there were three district commanders, data were
presented for each district over a 3-week period. On alternate
Thursdays, approximately 20 to 30 members of the department's
top brass, plus a handful of invited guests, sergeants, and patrol
officers, filed into a large room. The chief sat at one end of the
several tables that had been arranged to form an orderly triangle
and was flanked on either side by members of his command staff.
The chief, or in his absence, one of his deputy commissioners,
began the meeting at 9 a.m. Following some brief introductory
comments, the lights were dimmed. The district commander who
was presenting stood at the front of the room, while members of
the Crime Analysis Unit used laptop computers to project crime
data and maps onto a nearby screen. Over the course of two-and-a-
half hours the district commander, who was entirely responsible for the policing of his or her area of the city, reported on the district's crime incidents, trends, and tactical responses. In addition, the district commander faced questions, suggestions, and comments from audience members.

The multiple goals of this COMPSTAT meeting included eliciting collective input on crime patterns and problem-solving strategies, encouraging information sharing on crime locations, victims, and suspects, and facilitating the deployment of department resources. In addition, the forum acted as a mechanism for holding the district commander accountable for crime in his or her beat. Even though conversation was shared around the room, the focus of audience members remained on the district commander. The occasional failure to provide a satisfactory response to the various inquiries resulted in an upbraiding from the chief. Below, we assess to what extent COMPSTAT's core elements changed or modified existing bureaucratic structures in the Lowell Police Department.

ANALYSIS OF COMPSTAT IN LOWELL

Mission Clarification

According to Weber, bureaucratic organizations embody the principle of rationality: They establish the administrative structures for the successful accomplishment of well-defined and valued goals. However, over time the objectives that guide an organization and its employees can become less prominent or detached from the means intended to accomplish them (Wasserman & Moore, 1988). Thus, to refocus attention on the organization's core mission, COMPSTAT requires that leadership set a measurable crime reduction goal and hold managers accountable for their performance. In this way, employees are reminded of the importance of fighting crime.

Crime reduction lay at the heart of the mission of the Lowell Police Department—a goal that was closely associated with COMPSTAT. Shortly after he assumed control in 1994, the chief pledged to make Lowell the "safest city of its size in America." Free of potentially confusing percentage reductions, the mission statement was emboldened with powerful symbolism. Prior to the chief's arrival, public confidence in the department's ability to control crime had deteriorated to the extent that the owners of downtown businesses had voted to hire private security to patrol the city's commercial district. According to the chief, such a bold
proclamation was, "more than just trying to make people safer.... The city's future was hanging in the balance.... The goal gave people in the city some hope." In creating an attractive vision of Lowell as a desirable and pleasant place to live (again), it is likely that the mission statement appealed directly to residents. One respondent stated that the mission statement was a "big deal" and remembered that it was popular in the newspaper and among community members.

The adoption of a "concise, value-laden, and inspirational" goal to make Lowell the safest city of its size resembled Commissioner Bratton's focus on revitalizing the attitude that the police are primarily crime fighters (Simons, 1995, p. 82; Kelling, 1995). Aware of the department's focus on formal bureaucracy, which had exacerbated divisions between management and the rank and file, Bratton's rallying cry was positively received within the NYPD. Upon his arrival patrol officers had ranked fighting crime a lowly seventh on a list of activities they believed the department wanted to see from them. They afforded administration and management concerns the highest priority; writing summonses and holding down overtime ranked first and second respectively (Heskett, 1996). By appealing to the self-image of the police as crime fighters, Bratton reconnected officers with the police organization's primary purpose.

Unfortunately we were not able to make a similar comparison of police officer attitudes toward crime fighting before COMPSTAT was implemented in Lowell. However, as in New York, top management's clarification of the department's mission in order to help the police agency function more effectively resonated with line officers (Bratton, 1998; Silverman, 1999). Our observations and survey data suggested that patrol officers recognized and accepted the relationship between COMPSTAT and the department's orientation toward fighting crime. One officer described COMPSTAT's explicit focus on identifying crime patterns when he said, "It enables the department to give a focused effort on policing as opposed to haphazardly driving around in circles.... It allows the department to focus on a specific area." Results from our officer survey lent further support to the observation that the rank and file strongly associated the goal of crime fighting with COMPSTAT. Approximately 92% of those surveyed responded that "reducing violent crime" and "improving the quality of life" in the city were "very" or "somewhat important" to the department's COMPSTAT
strategy. The power of COMPSTAT’s image as a crime-fighting tool is further strengthened when we consider that the implementation of COMPSTAT was not accompanied by any department-wide training. Despite the absence of this means of fostering a shared understanding of COMPSTAT’s purpose, there was still a consensus that COMPSTAT was a means of refocusing the department’s energy on reducing crime.

This is not to suggest that some line officers were not skeptical about such an ambitious goal as becoming the “safest city.” In contrast to a crime reduction goal defined by a modest percentage decrease over a finite period (a year, for example), the adoption of such an ambitious and enduring goal as Lowell’s appeared to mitigate its impact within the organization—it was just too unrealistic for police officers to incorporate within their daily operations. One officer suggested that it was “not a practical statement” because crime could not “continue to drop forever.” Perhaps the difficulty of continually attaining such a challenging goal explained his comment that the only time he heard the mission statement within the department was when an officer at a crime scene joked, “Uh-huh ... another murder in the safest city in America.”

That the goal of fighting crime was widely shared indicates that this element of COMPSTAT was strongly implemented in Lowell. Even if some officers did not buy in entirely to the mission statement, they endorsed the focus of the effort. Thus, COMPSTAT helped top management mobilize the rank and file by reinforcing the traditional police organization’s focus on crime control.

Internal Accountability

Authority and control are essential aspects of bureaucratic organization. Leaders give orders to their subordinates who are subject to “strict and systematic discipline” (Weber, 1922/1978, p. 221). Subordinates generally obey these orders due to their belief in the rule-bound authority of their superiors. Thus, command and control tends to be centralized at the top of the organization. Because COMPSTAT establishes a formal system of control in which top leadership monitors, evaluates, and holds middle managers directly accountable for their performance, it

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3 In answering the question of how important reducing violent crime was to the department’s COMPSTAT strategy, 77% of officers surveyed responded “very important,” 15% “somewhat important,” 6% “not at all important,” and 2% don’t know (N = 95). In answering the question of how important the department’s COMPSTAT strategy was to improving the “quality of life in the city,” 74% responded “very important,” 19% “somewhat important,” 5% “not at all important,” and 2% “don’t know” (N = 95).
strengthens this feature of bureaucratic organization (Dornbusch & Scott, 1975, p. 82).

Similar to departments nationwide (Weisburd et al., 2003), Lowell made internal accountability an integral component of the department’s COMPSTAT program. In fact, the chief explicitly recognized the importance of this feature when he defined COMPSTAT as a means “to manage the police department in a timely manner with an eye toward accountability.” This element was also widely recognized among other ranks within the department. When asked what was particularly useful about COMPSTAT, one district commander responded that it prevented “slacking off.” Another commented that COMPSTAT was a way of “keeping them honest” because “having things up there on a map can show you how bad things are, and you cannot say, ‘Ooh, I missed those reports; I did not see them.”

Clearly, the district commanders recognized and accepted that COMPSTAT was a process that held them accountable for whatever occurred in their respective beats. They experienced this accountability most intensely at the department’s biweekly COMPSTAT meetings. Because all the command staff attended these meetings, COMPSTAT provided the chief with an ideal opportunity to display his authority and hold his district commanders publicly responsible. During these meetings, the chief constantly asked questions and made suggestions. He also used COMPSTAT as an arena to reward or punish his command staff (by admonishing or praising their performance) in order to convey his expectations about unacceptable/acceptable performance. Because the chief was averse to “humiliating” his officers, he preferred to ask questions and foster a supportive environment: “Police officers are competitive by nature. All you really need to do is give them the facts and ask them a question. They will go from there.” Just by being asked a question in front of their peers, the chief said, district commanders would feel accountable. That said, there were occasions when the chief was so displeased with the lack of initiative from his command staff that he took a harder line and “balled them out.”

COMPSTAT’s reputation as a pressure-cooker environment that held district commanders accountable was widespread in Lowell. Even patrol officers who rarely attended COMPSTAT meetings recognized this feature. Sixty-one percent of those rank and file surveyed reported that “holding district commanders accountable for crimes in their districts” was “very important” (26%) or “somewhat important” (35%) to the department’s COMPSTAT program. A slightly smaller proportion of officers
(56%) responded that "Holding officers accountable for crimes in their beats" was "very important" (18%) or "somewhat important" (38%). The fact that a greater proportion of officers believed that COMPSTAT was "very important" for holding district commanders, in particular, accountable, indicates some general recognition that accountability was experienced most acutely by middle-level managers. Because accountability was demonstrated most clearly in a public setting with high-ranking officials in attendance, it was experienced less acutely outside of that forum.

The department's COMPSTAT meetings put district commanders under considerable pressure, and this was widely recognized among the rank and file. Although line officers did not experience this pressure directly, many remarked on COMPSTAT's reputation for brutal confrontations with the department's highest ranking officers. One officer described COMPSTAT as a forum where officers had their "balls ripped off" and surmised that this served only to make individuals "reluctant to speak up ... reluctant to do their job." Another remarked that COMPSTAT could make an officer "someone's punching bag," and he added that during meetings, "[people] are sometimes kind of humiliated, or embarrassed in front of other people." Our observations suggested that "dressings-down" were more myth than reality, but these remarks coupled with our survey data showed that internal accountability was widely recognized as an important component of the department's COMPSTAT program and daily operations. Consequently, we believe this element was strongly implemented in Lowell. COMPSTAT meetings provided a rigorous mechanism for disciplining employees and stimulating direct and personal accountability. Moreover, because the top echelon established performance criteria for middle managers, participated in their decisions, and held them accountable, COMPSTAT helped reinforce the traditional command hierarchy of the police organization (Weisburd et al., 2003).

Geographic Organization of Operational Command

Whereas the division of official tasks into functionally distinct or fixed spheres is a principal feature of bureaucratic organizations, COMPSTAT assigns primary decision making responsibility to commanders with territorial responsibility. This geographic focus, therefore, represents an attempt to transform a traditional feature of police organizations. In Lowell, the department had succeeded in lowering operational command to middle managers who exercised considerable decision making authority over their assigned districts. However, their decision
making authority was not unlimited, and the level of geographic organization of operational command was further restricted by the high degree of functional specialization that continued to characterize the department.

Before the advent of community policing and COMPSTAT, the Lowell Police Department had been organized temporarily. A captain operated as a shift or watch commander and was responsible for supervising officers on a single shift for the entire city; once the shift was over, his or her responsibility ceased. Thus, under the old system, the lowest-ranking officer in the department with 24-hour responsibility for a geographic area was located at the command level—the deputy chief of operations. In contrast, under COMPSTAT, which was grafted onto the department’s community policing model, this power was devolved down one level to the district commanders who had 24-hour responsibility for their districts. So, geographic organization of operational command had shifted downward (on average) one-third, inasmuch as there were now three separate geographic commands. Additionally, about 60% of all personnel were assigned to the districts.

There are two specific components involved in COMPSTAT’s shift from a functional division of labor to one that makes geographic areas the prime organizing principle of operations—resources and decision making. Functionally specialized units that focus on specific crimes and that possess a great deal of autonomy are supposed to be placed under the direct command of district commanders, or made responsive to their needs. While the accounts of respondents in Lowell suggested that specialized units would try to accommodate a district commander’s request for assistance, supervision of these units had not been transferred to district commanders because of COMPSTAT. Before and after COMPSTAT, district commanders remained responsible primarily for patrol officers. The reassignment of a handful of detectives from headquarters to the districts was part of the department’s community policing, not COMPSTAT, initiative. In fact, COMPSTAT did not result in the department providing district commanders with additional specialists.

In terms of decision making, Lowell’s district commanders felt that they possessed significant autonomy in managing their own districts. According to the department’s organizational chart, the district commanders reported to the deputy superintendent of operations, but in reality they reported directly to the chief. To paraphrase the words of one district commander, they were very much “the captains of their own ship.” Under COMPSTAT, the district commanders were given a wider range of authority to make
decisions without having to get clearance from central headquarters. These included decisions regarding the redrawing of beat boundaries, deployment, and the selection of crime strategies.

Although COMPSTAT claims to decentralize decision making to the district level, it also continues to reinforce the ideal of top-down control. District commanders were encouraged to take initiative, but top management was willing to exercise decision making authority over them. In one case, under pressure from the community and the city to increase the number of walking routes, the chief overturned a district commander’s decision to cut one of his officer’s walking time in half (to 4 hours). This scenario helps illustrate how district commander autonomy may have been extensive, but that it also operated within certain limits defined by the chief. One observer commented on the chief’s style as, “you can do anything you want as long as I agree with you.” Decisions over routine staffing levels and the creation of task forces also revealed the obstinacy of the traditional hierarchical command structure. If a district commander required additional personnel or overtime, it was customary to approach either the chief or his deputies for permission. Furthermore, only the chief, not his district commanders, possessed the authority to assign officers to task forces.

COMPSTAT appeared to have consolidated decision making power by creating the job of district commander and using this job as the focal point for 24-hour responsibility. Previously, the organization’s decision making was done at levels both above and below that rank (by the command staff at headquarters and by shift commanders). Furthermore, district commanders possessed significant autonomy. The chief encouraged them to solve problems in their districts, to decide how to assign district personnel, and to cooperate with one another. This suggested that decision making was considerably more decentralized in Lowell than in more traditional agencies. However, this did not mean that district commanders possessed unrestricted authority. Our observations suggested that the chief liked to be kept informed of his district commanders’ decisions, required that they provide supportable reasons for their actions, and was not averse to exercising his authority over them. This process is more accurately characterized as participatory management than as a pure delegation of the chief’s authority.

In addition, the supervision of specialized units had not been transferred to district commanders as a result of COMPSTAT. In this regard, Lowell differed from the NYPD, which used COMPSTAT to reconstitute some precincts so that “all detectives,
drug investigators, and housing police who had previously reported to their separate borough and headquarters superiors" came under the direct control of the district commander (Silverman, 1999, p. 149). In contrast, detectives responsible for drug and serious crimes in Lowell did not come under the direct command of precinct commanders following the implementation of COMPSTAT, and the Housing Authority continued to operate as a separate precinct.

In sum, our observations suggested that key features of the bureaucratic organization had not undergone significant change under COMPSTAT: Many enforcement and deployment decisions continued to be functionally, not geographically, based. Command and control remained fairly centralized. The chief invited district commanders to participate in identifying problems and driving solutions: They engaged him on these matters, but he had the final say.

Organizational Flexibility

Extensive regulations and procedures give stability and order to large organizations by establishing predictable routines. In fact, Weber attributes the spread of the bureaucratic form of organization to its continuous machine-like efficiency in performing such routinized tasks (Gerth & Mills, 1958, p. 214). At the same time, regulations can limit the capacity of the organization to respond to unexpected problems. COMPSTAT challenges this feature by promising to respond rapidly and effectively to emerging or unforeseeable problems. This requires flexibility in how the organization uses its resources (Bratton, 1998; Henry, 2002, p. 250).

There are several ways that an organization can attempt to become more nimble. Management can try to negotiate with collective bargaining units for greater flexibility in making job and shift assignments. Management can budget for overtime, which allows managers to work around the constraints of set work shifts. Managers can create special units that are not bound to work in a particular geographic area or work shift, serving as "taxi squads" that are portable in when and where they work. They can require or reward cooperation and teamwork within and across organizational units. Ultimately, the flexibility of the organization is displayed when managers are able and willing to alter allocation structures and routines in response to nonroutine work demands.

In Lowell, the chief encouraged teamwork, and officers were sometimes reassigned to other units, or work shifts but, most often, reallocation of resources outside of normal patterns was done on an ad hoc, informal basis that actually minimized disruptions to
departmental routines. The most common occurrence involved a district commander directing an officer away from some of his more routine activities during a shift and asking him to pay particular attention to a specific problem area. In response to the ongoing problem of motor vehicle crimes in one district, the chief requested that a central detective be assigned from headquarters to work more closely with the Crime Analysis Unit (CAU). Another clear example of the reassignment of a specialist to a crime problem was the decision temporarily to move an assistant crime analyst from the CAU to the Criminal Investigations Division. In order to provide detectives with greater access to gang information, the crime analyst was relocated and assigned specific gang-related cases. Commenting on this move, the crime analyst stated that there was a need for someone in the detective division “to go over patterns” in regard to specific crimes. The department also tried to increase its flexibility by paying overtime, if necessary, as part of a crime reduction strategy. For example, in response to a brutal mugging in a highly visible downtown area, the chief authorized overtime funds for additional patrol over a 2-week period. According to a district commander, 2 weeks was about as much overtime as “the chief could handle.”

The capacity of the Lowell Police Department to cope with unexpected problems was constrained by traditional internal and external challenges that are very difficult for an organization to overcome—lack of available manpower and city politics. Budget constraints prevented the hiring of additional officers, and the number of specialist assignments restricted how many officers were available for routine patrol. The sentiment that there was a need for “more troops on the street” was widely shared, especially among the district commanders. In addition, the department was under pressure from city politicians and business owners to deploy officers to certain areas of the city at specific times. In response to this pressure, the chief required that his district commanders maintain foot patrols in the downtown area on the day and early night shifts. The reallocation of officers was also hindered by the chief’s obligation to support the local housing authority. Finally, flexibility was limited by the demands on an organization that was trying to pursue a number of conflicting objectives simultaneously. The organization wanted to be fair to its employees (e.g., stable shift assignments) but also responsive to unpredictable community needs as they arose (need for flexibility in shift assignments). It wanted to be equitable to its citizens but also responsive to politically powerful people and groups who wanted more resources for their priorities, regardless of the impact on maintaining
suitable levels of safety throughout the community. No contemporary police organization is long allowed to pursue any one objective when it experiences conflicting pressures, so the organization resolves this dilemma by working within the bounds of acceptable compromise—avoiding negative publicity or internal crisis for the balance struck.

In sum, the strategic reallocation of resources in Lowell was neither systematic nor profound. The chief told us that district commanders would willingly share their patrol officers if a crime occurred that warranted additional resources, but we never witnessed the redeployment of officers across districts (and district commanders reported that it rarely occurred). Nor did the department rely on "taxi squads." The low degree of implementation of this element of COMPSTAT could be attributed to the strength of several features of the traditional bureaucratic police organization (e.g., functional specialization, rules and regulations regarding employee rights) that restricted flexibility in favor of predictability and order.

*Data-Driven Problem Identification and Assessment*

Weber notes the importance of information gathering and record keeping to the sound functioning of bureaucratic organizations. Written rules governing employee conduct, responsibilities, and authority contribute to legitimacy, and official records provide a source of technical knowledge that helps the organization attain its goals. The collection of crime data has long been a feature of police organizations, but its use has been limited to gauging performance rather than driving decision making (Mastrofski & Wadman, 1991). In contrast, under COMPSTAT the rapid collection and analysis of crime information is central to daily operations. Relevant and timely crime data, computer mapping, and crime analysis can be regarded as examples of an increasing "rationalization of policing" (Manning, 2001, p. 83). According to its supporters, COMPSTAT makes data available to identify and analyze problems and to track and assess the department's response (McDonald et al., 2001). These data are made available to all relevant personnel on a timely basis and in a readily usable format.

If COMPSTAT truly represents a "sea change" in the way that the organization tackles crime (McDonald, 2004), we would expect to see much greater importance accorded to using crime data and mapping to identify patterns and trends, and much less to the traditional police approach of using highly selective and anecdotal accounts of individual cases. In Lowell, this COMPSTAT element
did result in some change in the way that crime data were used. As one Lowell officer stated earthily: "concern over information is different from 10 years ago when police officers did not give two craps about the UCR." But the shift from past organizational practices was modest. COMPSTAT data were used for identifying problems, establishing priorities, and deciding where and when to mobilize responses. However, despite the increased availability of data to help inform decision making, district commanders continued to serially review police reports, rather than consult statistics or maps, and then form impressions.

Data for crimes presented at COMPSTAT meetings (assaults, burglaries, drug activity, motor vehicle break-ins, motor vehicle damage, stolen motor vehicles, other crimes of interest, and traffic accidents) were obtained from officer arrest and incident reports, which were systematically collected and analyzed by members of the department's Crime Analysis Unit. Information that was entered into CAU's database on a daily basis included field report number, date, day of the week, location, shift, and district. The CAU also manufactured spreadsheets that gave details on each individual COMPSTAT crime in the city (divided by district), such as the suspects involved in an assault and battery case, and provided aggregates (e.g., the total number of assaults and the shift on which they occurred). Two to 3 days before the biweekly COMPSTAT meeting, crime locations were mapped using MapInfo and the CAU prepared various visual aids depicting crime data (e.g., bar and pie charts). All police reports were available on the department's mainframe, but the CAU provided the district commanders with hard copies of spreadsheets, maps, and crime charts to help them prepare for the COMPSTAT meetings.

Every day district commanders and their executive officers printed the previous day's police reports for the district. They read these to familiarize themselves with the crimes in their districts, to identify patterns by looking for underlying factors that appeared to explain or link together the occurrence of a number of crime events, and to assign detective follow-ups. District commanders were comfortable using the descriptive statistics (percentages, frequencies, means, etc.) in the spreadsheets, but because these data were only available 2 to 3 days before COMPSTAT meetings, they were primarily used as a mechanism for verifying the district commander's appraisal of crime in his/her beats. The importance of maps to the NYPD's COMPSTAT model notwithstanding, \(^4\) daily

\(^4\) Maple (2000, p. 105) claimed, "maps tell a story in a way numbers and narratives simply can't."
crime maps were unavailable in Lowell. Their unavailability did not seem to bother the district commanders, however, who told us that they could map addresses in their heads because they were familiar with the geography of the city.

Due to the lack of appropriate software, data were inaccessible to patrol officers via the department’s mainframe. Because officers rarely attended COMPSTAT meetings (the chief required that only two or three officers from the presenting district attend on a rotating basis), the rank and file received only snapshots of what happened through their supervisors, roll call, and the department’s daily newsletter. Besides their very limited participation at COMPSTAT meetings, patrol officers were not involved in the crime analysis process. As a result, they experienced COMPSTAT-generated crime strategies as a series of directives relayed down the chain of command.

Our observations in Lowell corroborated existing research on the limited nature of crime analysis carried out in most U.S. police departments (O’Shea & Nicholls, 2003). Analysis was heavily slanted toward collecting and organizing large amounts of crime data to facilitate the identification and apprehension of criminal offenders and the deployment of officers to problem areas. Other than for purposes of this traditional “crime control” function, data were not analyzed to identify underlying causes of problems, to tailor specific responses to these problems, or to assess the effectiveness of these responses (O’Shea & Nicholls, 2003, p. 11). At COMPSTAT meetings, reports of the disappearance of a specific crime problem were used as the primary indicator of a particular crime strategy’s effectiveness. However, there was no systematic assessment of how and why the problem disappeared. Such analyses would have required a significant modification to the character of data collected by the department. It also would have required training in the use of more complex statistical methods (e.g., tabulation and interpretation of bivariate and multivariate relationships), but Lowell’s district commanders had not received any additional crime analysis training. The greatest change was the speed at which traditionally available information was available to managers.

**Innovative Problem-Solving Tactics**

Strict adherence to rules and regulations within the bureaucratic organization encourages uniform action but can hinder experimentation. Although more traditional tactics might be the most appropriate response to a crime problem, COMPSTAT’s innovative component provides a forum for
exchanging ideas about crime control and customizing responses to particular problems or situations. This demands a free-flowing give and take of differing views, opinions, and experiences, in-depth evaluation of possible underlying causes, thoughtful discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of a wide-range of problem-solving alternatives, careful selection of the best possible strategies, and a willingness to choose strategies that are unusual and in that sense, "risky" (especially if they fail).

In Lowell COMPSTAT facilitated the gathering and effective dissemination of information to a much greater extent than it contributed to the implementation of innovative problem-solving tactics. We rarely observed the kind of in-depth analysis of problems articulated by Herman Goldstein (1990). Members of the department seldom looked beyond their own experiences by drawing upon knowledge gained in other departments, or by gaining insights from innovations in theory and research about crime control and prevention. Most often, specific field strategies continued to consist of traditional law enforcement powers applied in traditional ways. Where the Lowell police were innovative was in concentrating police activities on specific locales identified by the COMPSTAT process. While concentrating on "hot spots" represents an important innovation in policing that has received strong research support (Braga, 2001; Sherman & Weisburd, 1995; Weisburd & Braga, 2003), there was little innovation once hot spots were identified. Most often, patrol officers were ordered to adopt one or more of a general set of responses: to identify suspects and "keep an eye on things," to saturate an area, to step up traffic enforcement, to conduct "knock and talks," and to increase arrests. For example, in response to two unrelated incidents—an increase in prostitution in a particular location and the constant use of a pay phone by suspected drug dealers—the district commander put "extra cruisers" in the area. When one COMPSTAT meeting showed that the street-side windows of several parked cars in another area had been smashed, the chief asked his deputy commissioner: "what kinds of things have we done in the past?" The deputy commissioner suggested that they clamp down on motor vehicle violations. "You know, chief, sometimes you just get lucky. You catch a kid and they just talk. We need to get people in to talk to them."

We did witness a more innovative problem-solving strategy involving the closing down of a dilapidated boarding house that served as a staging area for many crimes, but this was the exception to the rule. The district commander tailored a multilevel response to this specific problem by involving the rank and file in
the decision making process, by compiling data to identify suspects and to catalogue evidence on a wide variety of incidents associated with this one location, and by coordinating with other city agencies.

The limits to innovation in Lowell can be at least partially explained by two closely related features of police organization—the rank hierarchy and the focus on accountability—whose origins lie in the authority relations that Weber argued characterize modern bureaucracies. By strengthening these features, COMPSTAT hindered brainstorming and reduced tolerance for risk. This, in turn, limited innovation. While there was some information exchange and sharing of insights during COMPSTAT meetings on how to tackle an important problem, there were definite limits to the nature, extent, and benefits of this collaboration. Mutual exchange was restricted by the expectation that, due to their position, higher-ranking officers had primary responsibility for communicating crime information. This constrained lower-ranking officers, or even officers of similar rank, from sharing potentially useful information that could be interpreted by others as criticisms. Because any suggestion might have been interpreted as implying that a member of the command staff had erred or was at fault, most officers chose not to contribute during the meetings at all (the safest course of action), or else made only short and simple comments reiterating what had already been said (the path of low risk). For example, a lieutenant told us that he would not “embarrass captains [district commanders] in COMPSTAT.” Members of the CAU also shared this tendency to bring discretion to the COMPSTAT accountability process and described doing their best to inform district commanders in advance of any changes in the COMPSTAT format because COMPSTAT was about “providing information, not catching people out.”

Innovation requires the identification of patterns of crime, deliberation about those patterns, and a careful consideration of the benefits and drawbacks of various approaches. It also means the possibility of failure, because trying something for the first time is often unsuccessful. However, due to the pressure of accountability, district commanders felt compelled to have already implemented a strategy by the time of the COMPSTAT meeting, which undermined the usefulness of brainstorming. Holding district commanders directly responsible for their failures also hindered experimentation. Failures are sources of learning and, in “learning” organizations, they are recognized as interesting, informative, and valuable. But Lowell, like most police
organizations, strove constantly for success without paying much attention to the whys and wherefores of failure. The emphasis on accountability encouraged quick solutions to crime problems that had some potential for success and minimized the risk of unsuccessful outcomes. In sum, COMPSTAT did not cultivate an environment that allowed district commanders to foster, develop, and test long-term preventive plans that might help reduce crime. Because it was more important to act decisively—even with an incorrect diagnosis and a hastily considered solution—than to ponder the evidence, weigh options, and take risks, innovative problem solving in Lowell remained underdeveloped.

*External Information Exchange*

A final element in the COMPSTAT process is external information exchange. By providing outsiders with greater access to the department, COMPSTAT can be used to generate external support among stakeholders, and to solicit and acquire information and input on the needs and priorities of the community. Furthermore, it can be used as a mechanism for providing external constituents with information on the department’s goals and its progress toward achieving them. This willingness to share information with those outside of the agency conflicts with Weber’s observation, and that of police scholars, that “official secrets” are typical of bureaucratic and police organizations (Manning, 1997, p. 125). Because specialized knowledge and knowledge that grows “out of experience in the service” bestows power on officials, they are reluctant to cede this to the public (Weber 1922/1978, pp. 225, 992).

In communicating information about a department’s mission, COMPSTAT can be used both to create knowledge about what the department is seeking and accomplishing, and to obtain information. Technologically sophisticated and dramatic, COMPSTAT is a powerful mechanism for helping the organization earn credit for its performance. It also has the potential to foster collaborations with municipal organizations and citizens that help district commanders implement more effective crime strategies and enable the department to attain its goals. Both of these processes garner support for the department’s and government’s top leadership, but both require that the department make visible more of its inner operations and expose itself to the risk of public censure. We should note that due to time constraints, we were unable to explore this element of COMPSTAT as fully as we would have liked. We only attended one formal meeting between a district commander and a local neighborhood group, and we did not
have the opportunity to interview local residents. As a result, our analysis of this component of external information exchange depends more on our general impressions and on comments made during interviews than on systematic observation of police-community interactions.

In Lowell, information that external constituencies acquired about COMPSTAT came almost entirely from the “dramatic” vehicle of the COMPSTAT meeting itself. Members of the press, command staff from neighboring police departments, local dignitaries (such as a visitor from the attorney general’s office), and academics from nearby universities, all attended COMPSTAT at some time during our research. These visitors appeared dazzled by the show, and when COMPSTAT was first implemented, it received significant and positive publicity in the local newspaper. In terms of representatives from municipal organizations, only the chief probation officer from the local district court attended COMPSTAT regularly. This limited the amount of input from outside sources, but did not mean that these sources were not involved in the COMPSTAT process. District commanders communicated frequently with city agencies in order to implement crime strategies.

Although the department did not actively discourage community members from attending COMPSTAT meetings, none were present on the days we observed. In theory at least, COMPSTAT certainly could operate as a mechanism for acquiring input from citizens on crime problems, either through the Internet, local media or community meetings. However, in Lowell, efforts to solicit citizen input were infrequent and extremely limited. COMPSTAT-generated crime data were used to help explain monthly or annual crime increases, but COMPSTAT products (sophisticated maps and up-to-date crime statistics) were not available on the department’s website, nor were they released to the press.

Sometimes COMPSTAT maps and crime data were available to the public (e.g., at regular monthly meetings between district commanders and local neighborhood groups), but our observations suggested that these products were used mainly to reassure residents that local crime problems were being quickly identified and tackled, and hardly at all as a means of obtaining feedback. At the one community meeting we attended, the district commander provided a one-page crime map of those incidents (burglaries and motor vehicle crimes) that he believed seemed to “be what people care about.” He used the maps to discuss crime prevention, to focus discussion on the issues he felt were most important, and to
reassure residents that he was "truly being held accountable for what is going on." He did not use them to share information on the department's crime strategies. Caution about exposing the department's performance and problem-solving strategies to public scrutiny helps explain why this COMPSTAT element did not receive much emphasis.

DISCUSSION

Its supporters have depicted COMPSTAT as an instrument of change that can reengineer police organizations to be more focused, knowledge-based, and agile. In doing so, they argue that COMPSTAT overcomes the limitations of a "large, thick bureaucracy" that hinder its capacity to operate effectively and reduce crime (Silverman, 1996, p. 196). Studies of COMPSTAT tend to be brief, rely heavily on anecdotal evidence, or concentrate on the nation's largest, and by any measure, most exceptional police department, the NYPD. We examined proponents' claims by conducting an in-depth analysis of COMPSTAT in a smaller and less extraordinary police department. The fact that Lowell had fully implemented COMPSTAT and had received national publicity for being on the "cutting edge" of policing mitigates the likelihood that our findings are idiosyncratic. In addition, although this case study certainly does not represent the experiences of all departments that implement COMPSTAT, many things we observed in Lowell were consistent with findings of our national survey and at other sites (Weisburd et al., 2001; Greenspan et al., 2003). These studies demonstrated that although fairly strong on mission clarification and internal accountability, COMPSTAT agencies were largely indistinguishable from non-COMPSTAT agencies on measures that gauged the program's other elements (Weisburd et al., 2003, p. 448). The thrust of our argument is that in Lowell, where the COMPSTAT changes sought to strengthen traditional bureaucratic structures, they were most successful. Where they tried to loosen or reverse these structures, they were much less so.

To facilitate a more textured assessment and explanation of how COMPSTAT changed the police bureaucracy, we used Weber's conceptualization of the modern bureaucratic organization. Our empirical case study suggests that COMPSTAT's effects are more subtle and complex than its proponents believe. Those elements of COMPSTAT that correspond with existing bureaucratic structures are more likely to change organizational practice, while those that do not have a much more limited effect. Furthermore, rather than streamlining the organization, COMPSTAT's operation appears to
be hindered by the same bureaucratic features that it purportedly transforms. As a result, COMPSTAT presents a set of challenges and opportunities to police departments that seek to implement its various elements.

COMPSTAT's implementation in Lowell placed greatest emphasis on mission clarification and internal accountability. Members of the department had a strong sense of the department's crime-fighting goal, and district commanders felt highly accountable for identifying and responding to crime problems. Holding officials responsible for attaining valued objectives embraces existing attributes of bureaucracies that are goal oriented and organized hierarchically. Though it could be argued that merely revitalizing an existing objective does not constitute real change, this would deny a significant shift in the focus and commitment of department members to fighting crime (Moore, 2003, p. 488).

While Lowell was fairly successful in moving closer to the Weberian ideal by focusing the organization's attention on a mission and sharpening internal management accountability, it was decidedly less successful with COMPSTAT's other key elements. Those elements that did not fit easily with existing bureaucratic structures were much less developed. The department was unable or unwilling to shift substantially toward geographic operational command, flexibility, data-driven analysis, innovations in problem solving, or external accountability. COMPSTAT's proponents offer it as a cure to overcome "bureaucratic structures" that arise within police organizations grapple with the challenges of using a variety of bureaucratic structures to cope with the complexity of crime, but the implementation of these COMPSTAT elements was tepid and frustrated by the inertia of the status quo. The collective benefits of existing bureaucratic structures—formalization, routine, and functional specialization—make them difficult to surrender for the promise of uncertain gains (Kaufman, 1971, pp. 8–10).

Geographic organization of operational command was at variance with the high levels of functional specialization that characterize the traditional police department. Specialists skilled in certain tasks provide the organization with a high level of technical expertise, or at least the appearance of such. The rapid reallocation of resources was hindered by the rules and regulations that establish routines and provide stability. Data collection and analysis were limited to tracking crime and illuminating hotspots with greater alacrity; they did not facilitate the development and evaluation of innovative crime control strategies. Data-driven
problem solving thus remained largely undeveloped as a source of police technical knowledge about crime (Bayley & Bittner, 1984). The emphasis on data for documenting and recording rather than for analyzing and evaluating is analogous to the bureaucracy's more conventional focus on amassing information. There was some innovation, but in general district commanders resorted to standard responses. These were defined by a rational means-ends calculation that favored predictable approaches and outcomes over experimentation and risk despite the promise of higher rewards. We did not observe a conscious plan to constrain the capacity of Lowell's COMPSTAT to enhance external accountability through information exchange. Nevertheless, the fact that public exposure to COMPSTAT was limited to the drama of COMPSTAT meetings suggests that it served primarily to communicate the technical efficacy of the organization. There was little regard for developing COMPSTAT's capacity to provide a channel of guidance or control from external constituencies to the department's policies and practices. We should note that COMPSTAT did result in modest improvements in all these areas, but it fell far short of the revolution in policing claimed by its supporters (Bratton, 1998; McDonald et al., 2001; Henry, 2002).

Moreover, our analysis of COMPSTAT reveals a paradox that Weber's bureaucratic model helps explain. The pressure of internal accountability strengthened the existing command hierarchy and hindered two of COMPSTAT's other key elements—innovative problem-solving and geographic organization of operational command. Officers were reluctant to brainstorm problem-solving approaches during COMPSTAT meetings for fear of undermining the authority or credibility of their colleagues. In addition, the danger of "looking bad" in front of superior officers discouraged district commanders from pursuing more creative crime strategies with a higher risk of failure. Similarly, the decision making authority of middle managers was limited by top management's willingness to query their judgment and to intervene in deployment decisions. Because the rank hierarchy within the bureaucratic organization legitimates superior power by providing the foundation for authority relations, any actions that would jeopardize the legitimacy of command are likely to be avoided. Thus, officers are reluctant to question their superiors or persons of the same rank during COMPSTAT meetings. Similarly, actions that reinforce the legitimacy of the command hierarchy, such as top leadership's involvement in the decisions of their subordinates, are difficult to change. Thus, paradoxically, the strengthening of the command hierarchy under COMPSTAT not only undermines
innovative problem solving, but also interferes with the decentralization of decision making authority to middle managers.

There may be no silver bullet for resolving the tension being traditional bureaucratic features and COMPSTAT's core elements; that is, it is zero sum. The arrangement of certain bureaucratic structures and routines, such as hierarchical authority, is necessary for the successful operation of a large administrative apparatus. Overdevelopment or underdevelopment of these features can hinder how the organization functions (Merton et al., 1952). For example, too much control from top leadership stifles innovation, but too little exposes the organization to excessive risk of reckless actions by employees (Simons, 1995). With this in mind, the challenge for any department that chooses to implement COMPSTAT is to reach the compromise that most suits its needs and those of its constituencies. Because there will always be friction between those COMPSTAT elements that conflict with existing bureaucratic features, implementing COMPSTAT resembles driving down the road with one foot on the accelerator and the other on the brake: There is going to be a lot of friction at the wheel.

This friction has been virtually ignored by police scholars and administrators. The proponents of COMPSTAT have argued that it can reinvigorate American policing at the same time that it provides a vehicle for effective crime prevention. In contrast, our analyses suggest that COMPSTAT, as a program, has very significant internal inconsistencies that limit its ability to be fully implemented in a police agency. Most significant, COMPSTAT's reinforcement of the bureaucratic hierarchy of policing stifles creative problem solving approaches. COMPSTAT, as we argued earlier, was in good part a response to what was seen as bureaucratic dysfunction in the New York City Police Department. However, our research suggests that COMPSTAT itself may also be prone to bureaucratic dysfunction, though of a very different type than that which spawned the program.

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