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COPPAC: *Researching Today for a Safer Tomorrow*
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Just a few days ago, the nation honored, among many others, the police officers who sacrificed their lives serving their communities. In a very different way, not too long before that, many marked the 10th anniversary of the uprising in Los Angeles following the verdict in the case against the police officers who beat Rodney King. Both of the events mark extremes in police community relations: one where members of both the local and national communities sought to show their thanks by honoring members of law enforcement, the other, where law enforcement came under attack from members of the local and national community.

While all this has been going on in what many call “the real world,” academics have been pondering issues of policing behind the scenes. The problem has often been that when academics study these issues, many outside of academia consider their work irrelevant to the real issues confronting law enforcement and communities every day. And where academics focus on issues that could be of tremendous importance to improving law enforcement, their research is often inaccessible to those who would apply it. On the other hand – headlines regularly report on “studies” that ask questions on the issues of day, but these “findings” from talk radio or news and website polls are frequently so methodologically flawed that their “results” suggest reforms that are sorely misguided. Indeed, when such “reforms” are adopted, they often allow the problem to fester, leaving the public even more frustrated years later when the situation has only worsened.

The new Center on Police Practices and Community (COPPAC) at UCSB, hopes to change all that. COPPAC will serve as a center of gravity for active, collaborative research by means of a three-pronged approach. First, COPPAC will bring together a diverse group of academics representing multidisciplinary expertise with a common interest in issues relating to the police and society. Second, COPPAC will facilitate research by collaborating with local law enforcement and community members. And third, to complete the cycle, COPPAC will facilitate the sharing of research findings with law enforcement and the community through publications, teaching, and meetings with law enforcement, the community and/or the media.

A few years ago we began discussing the idea of a new Center to address police community issues by combining the expertise of academics across many disciplines with input and assistance from law enforcement and the community. By opening lines of communication with law enforcement, we could find out from the police what issues they confront daily that are most relevant to them. By listening to community leaders and surveying community members, we could

learn what law enforcement issues are of greatest concern to them. Next, academics could tackle these questions to turn around and share the results with the very persons whose lives are most affected by these issues: whether it is partying in Isla Vista or dealing with hate crimes across the globe. For example, currently at UCSB, faculty are investigating police responses to domestic violence, sexual violence, and child and elder abuse; the nature of hate crimes and their relationship to law enforcement; perceptions of policing in the media; and the accuracy and social consequences of police portrayals in crime shows.

COPPAC seeks to open the door to more such research with significant input from law enforcement and the community and to then share the results of this work with those who hold a stake in the reforms suggested by the findings. Moreover, we will share our results that would be relevant to other communities around the nation, and even around the world where we have other academics working with us. For example, if we find a particular law enforcement-youth program seems to be more effective than others we have studied, many other communities may be spared wasting dollars on programs that sound good but have unproven benefits; instead, they can direct their funds towards those kinds of programs which the methodologically sound research has found to be most effective. In addition, we can investigate the effectiveness of programs in communities trying innovative solutions to common problems – and again – share the results to stakeholders other than just academics.

In supporting innovative research at universities, the public has entrusted universities to strive in their search for truth. With the support and cooperation not only of law enforcement officials but academics and community members alike, COPPAC's findings will hold a credibility not normally found by the many interest groups who often speak in support of or against law enforcement.

Law enforcement acts upon another form of public trust – one in which its members are entrusted with the power to remove some of the very freedoms we so cherish. How can law enforcement most effectively do this within the confines set by our founding documents which protect the freedoms we most value? If we first understand what makes programs and policies most effective, can't we apply these findings to improving relations and even cooperation amongst law enforcement, academics and the community – ultimately making a safer environment for us all?

Under our banner reading “COPPAC: Researching Today for a Safer Tomorrow,” on Tuesday, September 24th, leaders from local law enforcement and the community, including Sheriff-Elect Jim Anderson, UCSB Police Chief John L Mac Pherson Jr. and Santa Barbara Police Chief Cam Sanchez, as well as UCSB's Chancellor Henry T. Yang and academics from around the globe, will celebrate the opening of COPPAC at a reception. Anyone interested in more information about COPPAC or the reception should go to www.coppac.ucsb.edu or call 805 893-7879.