

Community Policing — Working Together to Prevent Crime

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Abstract

Since the mid 1980s, the concept of 'crime reduction through community partnership' has continued to grow in popularity. At a time when traditional policing activities failed to deliver tangible reductions in local crime rates, this significant shift in the traditional policing paradigm led to the increased use of one important policing strategy: community policing.

However, 'community policing' is a very broad term often used to describe many aspects of the process by which the police engage with the community in the prevention of crime. At its core is the recognition that by working with the community, law enforcement agencies can find local solutions to local problems. Engaging the community in crime reduction and prevention allows a more targeted approach to local priorities by empowering the community to identify and respond to local concerns. The benefits can be widespread, from improved police–citizen relations to decreases in the fear of crime.

This paper examines community policing in practice, with a particular focus on both national and international research into its effectiveness. In doing so, this paper will discuss the benefits and pitfalls of current community policing initiatives, outlining possible future directions for communities and crime prevention.

Introduction

Community policing has emerged in Australia as an innovative law enforcement response in dealing with, and preventing crime. It is a term often used to describe the process of engagement between the police and community and at its core is the recognition that by working with the community, law enforcement agencies can find local solutions to local problems. Community policing is thought to have gained momentum for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was the general community dissatisfaction with traditional law enforcement practices and the demand for greater police accountability for increasing crime rates. Community policing recognises that community members can work together with law enforcement agencies and play an active role in reducing local crime (Segrave and Ratcliffe 2004, p. 2).

The development of a clear definition of community policing is hindered by the fact that most police services, both nationally and internationally, label almost any 'non-reactive' police strategy as a community policing initiative (Edwards 1999, p. 76). It is recognised that a

unanimous definition of community policing has not yet been established (Fielding 1995) as it is conceptualised differently by many individuals (Cordner 1998). That being said, the fundamental cornerstone of community policing is in forming a workable partnership with the community, where the community plays a more proactive role in helping develop crime prevention strategies (state the general role of the community) (Peak and Glensor 1999 cited Segrave and Ratcliffe 2004).

Cordner (1998) determined that there are essentially four facets of community policing: The *philosophical*, where the community's role is fundamental and the police's role is expanded from traditional policing duties (Bennet 1998); the *strategic*, where ideas from community policing are developed into strategies for practice (p. 48); the *tactical*, which focuses on the implementation of the strategies developed; and the *organisational*; where the support offered at an organisational level should be encouraged to promote community policing.

Perceived benefits

Advocates for community policing have highlighted many reasons why community policing is beneficial to society. These arguments were broken down into three areas by Segrave and Ratcliffe (2004):

Community-specific advantages

- Mobilisation and empowerment of communities to identify and respond to concerns
- Improved local physical and social environment
- Increase in positive attitudes towards police
- Reduced fear of crime.

Police-specific benefits

- Improved police–community relationship
- Improved community perception of police 'legitimacy'
- An increase in officer satisfaction with their work.

Shared benefits

- A decreased potential for police–citizen conflict
- A reduction in crime rates
- A better flow of information between the police and community
- Better implementation of crime prevention and crime control activities, as a result of both parties working towards shared goals (Segrave and Ratcliffe 2004, pp. 5-6).

Not all community policing initiatives will achieve each and every benefit listed here and part of the problem of documenting success is that researchers rarely find that the strategies *only* have positive effects. Internationally, successful implementation of community policing has been documented, although the results are rarely black and white. Two specific examples of

the ambiguity of community policing success can be found in a United States experiment and in an evaluation of Hong Kong's implementation experiences. Community policing in Hong Kong has been found to be a positive step in improving police–public relations and engaging the public in crime prevention; however, the Hong Kong police were found not to promote greater community–police partnerships, and did not encourage the community to help develop law and order strategies, one of the common goals of community policing (Lo 2004). A US community policing study by Hawden (2003) assessed that the community's opinion of the police improved when police were more visible, however it did not increase their perception of police effectiveness (Hawden 2003).

Pitfalls

As an increasing number of studies are conducted on community policing, the pitfalls and challenges of implementing such strategies are becoming more evident. As community policing grows in popularity and implementation, studies have increasingly found that community policing is not a panacea that is easily implemented with immediate success. Related problems can manifest in three different areas: within the police service; within the community; and in the implementation of community policing initiatives.

Within the police service

Many studies on the police services in Australia and overseas have documented the challenges faced when implementing community policing. These include barriers from within the police organisational structure and the organisational climate (Giacomazzi et al. 2004), where the absence of strong leadership and encouragement in community policing strategies can negatively impact on community policing practices (Robinson 2003). Whereas police leadership in community activities can be needed and sought by its members, there are some less noticeable hindrances to implementing community policing. Police may also be reluctant to make community policing a priority (Segrave and Ratcliffe 2004) due to the perception that community policing is distinct from other 'police work,' thus reinforcing the notion that it is not 'real' police work.

Within the community

There can also be quite a romanticised perception that the community will be eager to embrace community policing methods. For some, community members are reluctant to seek and develop a sustainable partnership with law enforcement (Long et al. 2002), and communication constraints can often hinder community policing success, especially in areas with minority and special needs groups (Schneider 1998). Research has also found that community and police cohesion on the problems and solutions existing in a community is not necessarily present, and can be dominated by minority stakeholders (Bohm et al. 2000).

Implementation

There is no uniform model of community policing, and adopting the western model can pose problems in developing countries such as low levels of professionalism, disrespect for law enforcement, lack of community organisation and other contextual factors (see Davis et al. 2003). Community policing in Nordic countries was found to have limited success, and was abandoned in Finland and Norway. The initiative's failure was explained as the result of an already high perception of public safety, lack of citizen association of police visibility and safety and traditionally the lack of Nordic citizen involvement in its welfare state (Holmberg 2005). This demonstrates that the practice of transplanting community policing initiatives without accounting for different cultural contexts can prove to be a major hurdle in successful community policing implementation.

Future directions/challenges

In their overview of community policing, Segrave and Ratcliffe (2004) concluded there were three continuing challenges remaining for community policing implementation: building community partnerships, which in are often more challenging to develop than police perceive; making community policing an integrated approach to policing with other complementary policing strategies (e.g. problem-oriented policing and intelligence-led policing); and the need to strengthen research into community policing strategies to determine its effectiveness as a policing tool (pp. 11-12).

In this emerging era of community policing, it is rarely considered — or perhaps less widely advertised — whether the increase in community contact by the police can have adverse affects on the police. A challenge faced by those implementing community policing is the increase of civil litigation against police. Some researchers have hypothesised that due to heightened community contact by the police via community policing initiatives, police have greater exposure to litigious circumstances (Stubbs 1992; Worrell and Marenin 1998).

Overall, the challenges in implementing community policing vary from nation to nation — even state to state. Law enforcement agencies should not expect immediate results from implementing new community policing initiatives. Community policing requires significant financial and organisational investment, and agencies wishing to implement such practices should base actions on proven successful methods and only if they are able to be adapted to suit the local context (Brogden 2004, p. 649).

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