

Ideas in British Policing



Getting the best out of Community Policing

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Introduction

Neighbourhood or community policing is like democracy – everyone agrees it is a good thing but the consensus extends little further. Its scope and objectives are contested, and its role in policing is as uncertain as the methods by which it should be achieved. Yet the world's taxpayers have invested billions in it. This *Ideas* paper assesses the evidence on community policing, examines different versions of it – Problem-Oriented Policing, Reassurance Policing, Neighbourhood Policing – and highlights the lessons for successful community policing.

Community policing: the essentials

London's Metropolitan Police were the first modern police force in the world. Its first commissioners agreed from the outset that whenever the demands of law enforcement and order maintenance came into conflict, such as when there is an unruly crowd and police can see individuals who are part of it breaking the law, the first priority has to be to bring the crowd to order. This is because the police need public cooperation before they can enforce the law. Responsiveness to the public lies at the heart of community policing.

But many situations are more complicated than the example. Crime may be only one part of the problem. A community may also have low level anti-social behaviour, bad cooperation between the public and police, and mistrust between the people living and working there. This means there are a lot of different things the police might do to deal with the problem. So the first issue with community policing is that it is like a kaleidoscope – the picture changes according to perspective. It can be seen as an alternative to enforcement-oriented, rapid response policing; a process in which the public shares in crime control activity; or a series of methods to improve police/public communication (Weatheritt 1983). We can call these, respectively, the befriending, partnership, or consultative approaches.

Community policing means different things to different people. There are befriending approaches, partnership approaches and consultative approaches.

A crucial idea for all democratic police forces is that their legitimacy comes from being locally accountable to the public they serve and from being independent from political control. It is not Home Secretaries but the Police Authority – representing the local population – that is responsible for appointing chief constables and for the delivery of policing at local level (Sharp 2005: 86).

The democratic legitimacy of policing depends on the police being accountable to the community they serve. This has to be as direct and local as possible to carry the public with the police.

Community policing takes local accountability very seriously. Local police commanders are required to consult the public and reflect their views in setting priorities, and contemporary initiatives like Neighbourhood Policing get their legitimacy from being responsive to local communities.

In order to achieve legitimacy it is important that community policing programmes acknowledge variation within communities. Communities are not all the same, their members can have competing interests, and some of these interests may be unlawful. We should not have too rosy a view of ‘community’, and must recognise that treating communities fairly may mean not treating all communities exactly the same. To see why, we next explore the nature of contemporary communities.

Community: continuities and change

When community policing first emerged in the 1970s, it encapsulated a romantic view of the community based on a belief that the police and public were close and communities did not change much, so officers knew public

concerns from regular contact and acted on them. Historians can debate whether there was ever such a time but the point is that like any icon, it was not entirely realistic. It assumed that every community had a shared value system. All the police had to do was to share in the values and whatever they did would both define and deliver the common good. This is why at one and the same time, community policing both appeals to the public and fails to deliver on its promise. It evokes a 'golden age of policing' that probably never existed (Reiner 2000) but makes people feel good when they think about it. The thought may be reassuring but it is not a recipe for how community policing should be done in the 21st century. However, it does give an insight into what values the public brings to the exercise and this can inform more contemporary ways to deliver community policing.

The starting point for optimising community policing has to be a realistic understanding of the contemporary community. Historians tell us that the kind of community in the romantic image has been declining for decades. Social relationships based on residence, and neighbourhoods composed entirely of people sharing similar ethnic, social and economic characteristics, can still be found but they are not the norm in our urban, mobile, constantly-changing society. Divisions and competing interests are at least as important as similarity and harmony. But the negative view of contemporary community can be as unreliable in some locales as the nostalgic view is in others.

Early ideas of community policing did not lead to effective policing because they were based on an outdated idea of 'community'. For community policing to work the police have to get and use accurate information about the community from people in a position to know. The community is not 'dead' but in many places it is constantly changing and change can be a resource to the police as well as a challenge.

As an organisation that requires evidence, the police should be like the residents of the American state of Missouri, which calls itself the 'Show Me State'. Missourians don't take anything on trust, they demand the evidence. When the police try to understand a community so as to deliver the right policing services it should not be based on assumption, but on genuine engagement and careful assessment of information from community members. They should even allow for the fact that people who may be generally anti-police can be allies in some circumstances. There can be local ties even in multiply deprived areas, especially around extended family networks, and local networks of association can be very important in community policing.

Nowadays we look to community policing not just for policing services but to play a role in delivering democracy and helping community development (Levinger 2004; Vera Institute of Justice 2003).

Contemporary community policing involves a suite of interventions with several, meshed purposes – public contact and reassurance is combined with deterrence, prevention, and intelligence-gathering (Bennett 1994). So the contemporary vision of community policing is multi-dimensional (De Blicek 2006):

- It advocates *participation*, with the community itself having a major part in interventions;
- it promotes *equity*, seeking interventions that result in manifestly fair outcomes;
- it is *sustainable*, because it is not a 'one off' but is embedded in the legal and policy framework,
- and it is *empowering*, because it affords access to services and encourages the public to participate in agenda setting.

Nowadays we look to community policing not just for policing services but to play a role in delivering democracy and helping community development (Levinger 2004; Vera Institute of Justice 2003). These larger purposes widen the indicators of successful

community policing. They include a decrease in fear of crime/disorder, an increase in police legitimacy, and the creation of 'social capital' (Putnam 1997). Social capital is a sense that if one needs help, it is not just the official agencies one can turn to, but neighbours and other voluntary groups. Social capital can help people deal with their troubles even in areas of multiple deprivation. Today's understanding of community policing includes the idea that helping citizens to be the first line of defence against crime builds up social capital and also includes the idea that community policing secures police legitimacy (Bowling and Foster 2002), a lesson borne out by the evaluation of Reassurance Policing discussed later. But we now also recognise that policing alone cannot secure a harmonious and resilient community (Bayley and Shearing 1996). That does not mean it is unimportant – remember that the Patten Report (1999) called community policing 'the core function' of the reconstructed Police Service of Northern Ireland. Community policing is amongst the premier ways that the whole political system secures legitimacy. The general public undoubtedly continues to value community policing. However, our enhanced realism tells us that successful community policing must overcome obstacles of interpretation, implementation, and evaluation. We profile these obstacles next.

Reviving the beat

There are many community policing initiatives and the concept is broad enough to include multi-agency partnerships, police/public

consultation meetings, and crime prevention programmes like Neighbourhood Watch. However, community policing's most common form, and the one dearest to the public, is long-term assignment of patrol officers to locale-based beats. Officers are tasked to cultivate informants, forge alliances with neighbourhood-based organizations, and diagnose the problems of residents, local businesses, and institutions like schools. Much of the public appeal here probably derives from evoking that mythical 'golden age' of policing, but evidence for the effectiveness of this approach is mixed. Achieving effective community policing by this approach involves delicate balances and can easily be knocked off course, for example, by local political changes or a new senior officer with different priorities.

Police managers, frontline officers and residents all have a vital part in success - this is the issue of inter-dependency. Frontline commitment is crucial, but in turn depends on senior manager support (Lurigio and Rosenbaum 1994; Lurigio and Skogan 1994). An early example of how organisational, operational and individual factors intertwine was a Metropolitan Police initiative that achieved significant successes by focusing on crime control and protecting community police from diversion to other duties (Fielding 1995). The initiative took advantage of the chief superintendent's enthusiastic backing and of the decommissioning of an old police station, which temporarily provided community police with their own station and vehicles.

While the contemporary context is different, the message is that individual, operational and organisational factors inter-relate, and must all be 'just right' to achieve effective community policing.

It is sometimes assumed that there is something special about officers who are effective in community policing. True, distinct differences have been reported between the *practices* of neighbourhood police officers and rapid response officers (Miller 1999), with the former taking more time with local contacts, and using a 'big picture' approach when considering interventions. But a purely personality-based approach misses the point. Where community policing is working it is not officers' personal qualities that make service delivery distinctive compared to the standard rapid response approach but the *kinds* of service delivery that community policing makes available and the ways that officers are accountable for their work.

Successful community policing involves a coordinated effort. Leaders, middle-ranking officers and frontline officers have to work together and not just at the outset. The rank structure can be an obstacle – successful CP requires frontline officers to have more autonomy and managers need to back them, while also being vigilant to prevent abuses.

Community officers work with different resources, chiefly of time and protection from distractions. As well as formal management, community officers are accountable to their local public. If things are working as they should, this is because they have a known face and it is regularly seen, in contrast to the patrol officer who may deal with a given incident and never see the same people again. Miller (1999) found that women and minorities were drawn to community policing as it offered avenues for officers who are relatively marginalised and this then drew white males into these roles because it came to be seen as a route to advancement. As well as this diversification of officers performing community policing, Miller highlights the particular contribution that officers of minority ethnicity and/or different sexualities can make to the work itself.

We should not equate community policing with 'social service' and fast response, dispatched patrol with 'crime control'. Officers strong on crime control can exploit the resources that the community policing role makes available in distinctive ways.

The important point is that it is not the individual but the role that produces the differences in service delivery. There is evidence that officers who come into the role with a crime-busting orientation can do good community policing (Fielding 2001). We should not equate community policing with

'social service' and fast response, dispatched patrol with 'crime control'. Officers strong on crime control can exploit the resources that the community policing role makes available in distinctive ways. Since the public does not generally look to police for friendship but to resolve crime and disorder problems, such officers have the advantage of playing to public expectations and therefore receiving their support. It can be very satisfying to fully engage with a given crime/disorder problem compared to the short-term interventions in rapid response work.

Discretion is central to the police role. By granting resources of time, encouraging local contacts, and making officers accountable to the public, community policing grants officers enhanced discretion. This does not excuse supervisors from ensuring it is used effectively, and the challenge to the organisation in giving frontline officers additional autonomy should not be underestimated. But we also know that, while officers can rise to the challenge when granted greater autonomy (along with clear targets), they also respond negatively when they feel their rightful discretion is constrained. They are used to weighing courses of action in relation to the specifics of incidents and reaching a balanced view of what to do. For example, Rowe (2007) reports an initiative against domestic violence that substantially reduced frontline officer discretion by imposing an unconditional arrest policy. Officers found this 'difficult to reconcile with their notion of their own professionalism' (Rowe 2007: 279). Indeed, the policy raised 'difficult questions

about ethical policing and victim-centred approaches' (ibid) because the victims themselves repudiated this blanket response to domestic violence.

So, while it is certainly true that community policing cannot succeed without the active support of supervisors, managers and organisation, we must see engagement with community policing from frontline officers' perspective, where personal agendas (e.g., taking a community assignment as a step toward promotion), organisational resources (the effects of delivering service by fast response versus community policing), and the 'people skills' used to resolve situations (e.g. discretion) all must be taken into account. Individual, cultural, operational, and organisational factors all mesh together in a successful community policing initiative. Such a coordinated approach to problem-solving is our next topic.

Successful community policing requires much orchestration and unrelenting focus at every level from frontline up to force headquarters and the top of local government.

Problem-Oriented Policing

Problem-Oriented Policing (Goldstein 1990) uses a crime prevention approach to diagnose problems and design lasting solutions, including target-hardening and thinking oneself into crime and disorder situations

from the perpetrator's perspective. In a typical instance, Davies (2003) reports the case of a countryside carpark with high rates of vandalism against cars left by walkers. A pure enforcement response would be to deploy an officer to catch perpetrators *in flagrante*, but the POP response was to license snack vans and provide picnic tables. This 'natural surveillance' saw a 48% decrease in its first year. Under POP, police response is shaped by the specifics of perpetrator actions, an assessment of harm, evidence that the problem is recurrent, and an assessment of public views (Eck 2001). The trouble is that many entrenched crime/disorder problems arise from complex causes, have an elaborate mechanism that is not susceptible to simple deterrents, and although persistent, are mobile and sporadic. Forces have to train officers to think imaginatively, help them plan interventions, and not demand instant solutions. Thus supported, POP can stimulate effective crime prevention, and the next section builds on POP's focus on problem definition.

Community policing often involves efforts to improve civil order in neighbourhoods. This is unlikely to affect serious crime problems but police efforts to promote civil order can promote a neighbourhood's sense of common purpose and result in a more orderly and cooperative community.

Working with the community

Community policing has to be clear about the kinds of problems it is targeting. Is the main problem crime? Social disorder? A run-down physical environment? These things are inter-related but research shows how they fit together. The 'broken windows' idea (Wilson and Kelling 1982) argues that antisocial behaviour, disorder and incivilities can impact on public feelings of safety, and that increasing disorder causes higher rates of more serious offending. Sampson and Raudenbush (1999), Taylor (2000), and Harcourt (2001) have disproved the link to serious offending, but the basic 'broken windows' point is important – regulating disorder promotes a sense of neighbourhood security. Police interventions encourage a community's own efforts to secure an orderly social environment. Dealing with disorder may not directly impact on serious crime but stabilising neighbourhoods creates social cohesion that reduces disorder and, to a lesser extent, crime, by disabling the opportunities that let them happen.

Police should not just ask how neighbourhoods socially organise but for what purpose. The key thing is not to have a list of neighbourhood organisations but to know what actually gets done in the neighbourhood and who does it.

Our knowledge of how police can help communities achieve greater cohesiveness is improving. Carr (2005) found that community policing strategies attuned to a Chicago neighbourhood's horror at its first drive-by multiple murder improved the community's capacity to police itself. Police trained residents and helped them develop solutions, ranging from shutting down a problem bar to campaigning against a condominium development and mounting a campaign to replace the corrupt governing body of a local school. Controlling low-level disorder previously relied primarily on residents but was replaced by a 'new parochialism' combining public and resident efforts. Rather than trying to address the diverse (and even contradictory) interests of the whole neighbourhood, Carr suggests police should focus on neighbourhood-based organisations that represent the majority interest of legitimate citizens.

So community policing can bring benefits of social integration, the responsiveness of city services to residents' needs, and improved handling of urban decay (Skogan and Steiner 2004). Working against social disorder provides public reassurance. Disorder is important in the public's sense of how secure their social environment is, because signs of disorder are comparatively visible and frequently encountered compared to signs of crime. A prime way to impact on public insecurity is for policing to be brought closer to the public and made more visible. Events that can be used as a focus for community

building, like Carr's drive-by slaying, can only be identified by detailed local investigation.

Well-informed community engagement earns police dividends in terms of legitimacy. When the first Metropolitan Police commissioners emphasised the importance of public support, they also insisted that it was best if public support was voluntary and came from most of the people most of the time. This kind of voluntary support directly depends on feeling that the police are legitimate (Tyler 2004). Freely offered cooperation is a sign not just of consent to be policed but of belief in the police and a feeling that the relationship between police and public is what Manning (1977) calls a 'sacred' part of citizenship. Feeling that the police are legitimate reflects the public's assessment of how the police use their powers. This assessment works independently of people's perception of how effective the police are in controlling crime. It is not so much the results of community policing that improve perceptions of police but the boost to their legitimacy associated with enhanced visibility and engagement (Hawdon et al 2003). Such insights from evaluations of community policing are our next topic.

Evaluating Community Policing

As the discussion above suggests, there is plenty of evidence that enhanced police presence has a tangible impact on disorder, a more limited effect on crime, but can substantially improve public satisfaction with police (Bennett 1994). However, one finding rises above the rest in terms of successful community policing: programme integrity, and

organisational and officer commitment, are vital. Success requires:

- An organisation-wide community policing ethos
- Decentralised decision-making
- Locale-based accountability
- The involvement of auxiliaries
- Proactive tactics oriented to crime prevention
- A problem-solving approach
- Sincere engagement in inter-agency partnerships and public involvement

One of the most sustained initiatives, the Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy, emphasised integrating city services – police, housing, social services – and involving residents. Tens of thousands of residents and officers were taught to analyse local crime/disorder problems. A key innovation was a one page City Service Request Form covering all requests and every significant service-providing branch of municipal government.

The 'diagnostic' work involved in identifying crime and disorder concerns gives a clearer purpose and enables relationship-building. Taking the trouble to identify local 'prime movers' and to understand their relationship to local organisations and to the police provides police with ways to prioritise demand and maximise the impact of their interventions.

Government committed to respond within a week to all requests. Every patrol car carried paper copies but also an online version that could be submitted from the car. Citizens raised disorder problems police had seldom prioritised - graffiti, public drinking, vandalism, truancy, loitering, begging, domestic disputes (the Department of Constitutional Affairs recently launched a similar initiative; see www.fixmystreet.com).

CAPS ran for over a decade. Crime and disorder problems declined by seven percent, with gang violence falling ten percent. The property and street crime index fell from 40% to 31%, the largest declines being robbery and assault. Burglary, car theft and car vandalism declined eight percent. These are not spectacular improvements but disproportionately reached those most in need, particularly minorities. There were sustained decreases in fear of crime, and perceptions of police responsiveness to community concerns rose 20% (from below 40%). Those who thought police were doing a good job working with residents to solve problems rose twenty percent (to 59%).

One of the many instructive things about CAPS was that it impacted on ethnic minority Chicagoans as well as the white majority. The most substantial improvements in police/public relations were between police and blacks. But relations with Hispanics showed no improvement despite targeted efforts at engagement. Hispanics began with the most adverse self-rated relationship with the police and ended the CAPS period the same,

perhaps because they also remained at the bottom of the economic table.

However, in Brazil higher participation in community based associations occurred in poor areas, implying that the lower the economic base, the greater the receptiveness toward building cohesion through community policing. This is confirmed by findings where the opposite circumstances operated, in Ruteere and Pommerolle's (2003) study of community policing in Kenya, where a lack of understanding on the ground simply resulted in police reinforcing elite interests, so the programme further marginalized the poor.

Community policing's role in reducing fear and increasing feelings of security is supported by international evidence (Reisig and Parks 2004). For example, in Brazil it 'function(ed) as a conduit to foster improved relations between the community and the police and reduce fear among residents' (Kahn 2000: 12). It can be particularly helpful where police legitimacy rather than crime control is a central issue, as in Russia and Lithuania during the transition from communism (Uildriks and Van Reenen 2003).

How community policing fares with the poor is more a matter of how open to integration they are than pure economics. The very poor may still have strong family and local networks that can support community building.

The UK and US evidence that community policing can aid social cohesion (Home Office 2004; Pino 2001) is not limited to well integrated, affluent areas (Reisig and Parks 2004). With this context in place we now turn to recent community policing initiatives in the UK, namely Reassurance Policing and Neighbourhood Policing.

Reassurance Policing

Reassurance Policing stemmed from ACPO's (2001) desire to address the 'reassurance gap' where public feelings of risk and fear of crime continued to rise despite official crime statistics and the British Crime Survey showing crime was actually falling. Reassurance Policing borrowed the idea of problem definition from Problem-Oriented Policing, but emphasised public input, introducing responsive interventions that were closely fitted to the characteristics of particular local problems.

Reassurance Policing was not a single strategy but a number of initiatives addressing fear of crime and lack of public support for the police. Its core involved:

- Posting dedicated police teams to geographical areas with a brief to cultivate contacts
- Conducting high visibility foot patrols
- Addressing crime/disorder problems prioritised by the public

The key player was the foot patrol officer, a revival of the 'bobby on the beat' that is so popular with the public. To satisfy the foot

patrol requirement, a new form of police auxiliary, Police Community Support Officers, were introduced. PCSO's have limited training and powers, and largely act by referral to regular officers, but their key advantage is that they enjoy strong public support. It helps that, in cities, their success in recruiting minorities better reflects the urban population (Millie and Herrington 2005).

Producing Reassurance Policing collaboratively with the public required systematic orchestration and constant briefing to ensure programme integrity and discourage mission drift.

The Home Office evaluated Reassurance Policing in 16 sites (in eight forces). Tuffin (2006) reports there were positive changes in:

- Public perceptions of crime levels
- Fear of crime
- Perceived risk
- Public confidence in police
- Perceived police engagement with the community

The news was not all good: there was no matching reduction in actual crime rates and although some crime types did fall in some sites, in all but one the crimes were not those locally prioritised as part of the initiative. Nor was there any change in social capacity indicators, like trusting neighbours, being prepared to intervene against anti-social behaviour or feeling the community was

cohesive. Producing Reassurance Policing collaboratively with the public required systematic orchestration and constant briefing to ensure programme integrity and discourage mission drift.

Reassurance Policing was soon subject to active reconstruction by police. Its objectives were elaborated by aims like increasing community cohesion, providing structure to existing community policing, and improving the physical environment (Millie and Herrington 2005). That meant dedicated resources and manager commitment had to be constantly defended against competing pressures, failure of resolve, officer skepticism, and over-reaction to early setbacks. Evaluators had to constantly monitor delivery to ensure officers knew what to do and that adjustments made to address local circumstances were consistent with Reassurance Policing principles.

Neighbourhood Policing

Following the Reassurance Policing evaluation the Home Office committed to a national roll-out under the name 'Neighbourhood Policing'. The Home Office declared Neighbourhood Policing was 'much more than high visibility reassurance policing', emphasising priority-setting by local communities (*Home Office News Release*, 22 February 2006). However, while each 'neighbourhood' would have its own dedicated Neighbourhood Policing team, the size of the neighbourhood differed 'from area to area'. The announcement declared that the essential thing was approachability: every resident would know their local officer's name and 'be able to contact them'.

So far the Neighbourhood Policing experience suggests that this latest version of community policing will do exactly what its Reassurance Policing predecessor said on the tin: it will reassure, but it will not necessarily reduce crime or build communities. How long the first effect would endure in the absence of the second and third is down to the police.

Current frontline officers testify that there is little agreement about the effectiveness of Reassurance and Neighbourhood Policing (I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this point). Indeed they find greatly varying public response to exercises like the 'Respect Action Week' tried in some forces, where officers go door to door with housing services and local authority staff. In about 10% of households the visits caused consternation. Some thought the police were calling to report injury/death of a loved one while others told officers to concentrate on catching criminals. Officers felt it was naïve to think that police and certain communities could suddenly relate better. Stanko and Hales' companion *Ideas* paper also notes problems in Neighbourhood Policing about public priorities based on impressions rather than hard evidence. These reservations are an important part of weighing up community policing, but only an element in a balanced assessment, to which we now turn.

The future of Community Policing

Given the nature of contemporary society, community policing's best prospect is to capitalise on the most immediate shared concerns: crime and disorder. Such problems give police their best chance of marshalling a mutual community of interest. Their efforts are more likely to register with some (homeowners, businesses, the elderly) than others. Community policing relies on a realistic estimation of friends and enemies. It does not have to pretend it has universal appeal to reach those whom police have previously neglected. However, it must accept that standards of order vary by locale and may involve ignoring certain infractions to engage those normally aloof from police.

Even in high crime estates most residents want to live free of predatory crime and disorder. Informal social control occurs even here (Foster 1995). Even criminals seek to thwart crime in their *own* neighbourhoods (Pattillo 1998). Police need to know communities well enough to see who will help on each particular occasion in relation to a particular problem. Urban communities are highly diverse and generate competing demands. Officers functioning as part of a community can arbitrate such demands, developing respect by an informed use of discretion.

A central irony of community policing is that its successes are often organisationally 'invisible'. To protect relations with contacts, community

officers may refrain from direct enforcement, passing information to squads or standard patrol officers. Their most effective work may thus be claimed by others. Moreover, they may deter offending, for example, by moving people on from crime-opportunity situations. More sensitive measures are needed of how community policing works on the ground (Fielding and Innes 2006).

There are numerous challenges in delivering community policing. Police must decide how to respond operationally to local demands, what kind of information they will need when they do respond, and what happens when the community to whom they are to be responsive is alienated from mainstream values or divided into factions. Implementing community policing requires re-thinking both the police and community role in crime prevention, re-structuring command and control procedures and reward and supervisory systems, and evaluating currently unmeasured police outputs. But for many these challenges are well worth facing.

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