Role of community policing in enhancing community safety

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The policy paper, 'Building Communities, Beating Crime', published by the UK Government in November 2004, set out plans to increase neighbourhood policing, ensure that the police service has a stronger customer focus and increase the visibility, accessibility and accountability of officers. Revitalising community policing for the 21st century was declared to be central to the Government's approach.

This came as no surprise, bearing in mind that as a result of the police reforms over the last 20 or 30 years, '… police forces are being forced by legislation and central government policies to change their mode of policing from one of service delivery to one of enforcement. Such a step contradicts the philosophy from which British policing has evolved over the years and is likely to bring the service into conflict with the communities they seek to serve, as the service they have come to expect is no longer provided in the manner expected' (Department of Criminology, 2004:4-21).

This emphasis on reactive crime fighting rather than crime prevention has failed to reduce crime and the fear of crime. It also 'failed to inspire the public, to obtain legitimacy and public support' (Brogden and Nijhar, 2005:30). The concept of community policing, with its historical roots and principles embedded in Common Law, is increasingly seen as the most appropriate solution to this problem and the way to enhance community safety.

The main part of this article will start with definitions of such key terms as 'community', 'community safety', 'quality of life' and 'community policing'. This will be followed by a brief examination of the impact of community policing upon community safety. The size limitation of this article does not allow an in depth analysis of all the models and approaches to community policing, therefore, it will be mainly concentrated on the analysis of the recent experience of policing in the UK. Throughout the analysis of the evidence drawn from various academic sources, the article will critically assess the notion that the adoption of community policing will enhance community safety.

The Oxford Compact English Dictionary (2003:215) says that the word 'community' originated from the Latin 'communis' meaning common. The dictionary defines 'community' as a group of people living together in one place and/or holding certain attitudes and interests in common. McCold, P. and Wachtel, B. (1997) pointed out that community policing has tended to define communities as existing in specified locales or neighbourhoods. Community policing initiatives often involve the creation of foot patrols with the permanent geographic assignment of officers and mini-stations serving a particular neighbourhood. Attempts to organise and

unify neighbourhood residents into a "community" are also common practice (Rosenbaum, 1994). In urban settings, each neighbourhood may have its own look, and perhaps residents feel some sense of collective ownership of their area. However, this does not necessarily translate into significant interaction or the formation of stable personal relationships. The natural communities that exist are spread out over varying distances, rarely co-locating with geographic boundaries.

Johnston (2000:54-55) argued that the singularity of 'community' has given way to the pluralities of communities. These include moral communities (religious, ecological, gendered); life style communities (of taste and fashion); communities of commitment (to person and non-person issues); contractual communities (comprised of subscribing consumers); virtual communities (joined together in cyberspace); and so on. Such communities are diverse, overlapping, pragmatic, temporary, and, frequently, divided from one another. To this list, we can add ethnic communities (where race provides a central organising point); socio-economic communities (determined by class interest); and age communities (from the leisure pursuits of young to inter alia, the guarded communities of the wealthy elderly) (Brogden and Nijhar, 2005:51). A multiplicity of communities was officially recognised in a Strategic Plan for 1999 to 2002, published by the Home Office, the Lord Chancellor's Department and the Attorney General in March 1999. This document was developed under the influence of the report of the inquiry into the death of the black teenager, Stephen Lawrence (the 1999 Macpherson Report).

Bearing all this in mind the definition of community offered by Professor John McKnight (Australia) seems to be the most suitable for the purpose of this essay. He defines community as 'the social place used by family, friends, neighbours, neighbourhood associations, clubs, civic groups, local enterprises, churches, ethnic organisations, temples, local unions, local government, and local media etc' (as cited on www.nican.com.au).

'Community safety' is a term that originates from the 1991 Morgan Report. There is no singular universally recognised definition of community safety. The Community Safety Advisory Service defined community safety as an 'aspect of 'quality of life' in which people, individually and collectively, are protected as far as possible, from hazards or threats that result from the criminal or anti-social behaviour of others, and are equipped or helped to cope with those they do experience. It should enable them to pursue, and obtain fullest benefits from, their social and economic lives without fear or hindrance from crime and disorder' (as cited on www.csas.org.uk).

The term 'quality of life' is used to describe an individual's satisfaction with his or her life and general sense of well-being. It is often measured as physical, psychological and social well-being. Quality of life includes those aspects of the economic, social and physical environment that make a community a desirable place in which to live or do business (such as climate and natural features, levels of crime and disorder, access to housing and education, employment opportunities, medical facilities, cultural and recreational amenities, and public services).

As Brogden and Nijhar (2005:1) pointed out, 'community policing has been the buzzword in Anglo-American policing for the last two decades. But it comes in all shapes and sizes. From the specifics of problem-solving by the local beat officer to the grand philosophy of a policing

that is community sensitive, accountable, and transparent, it has not and will not be subject to clear definition'. Trojanowicz and Bucqueroux (1990:5) define community policing as '… a new philosophy of policing, based on the concept that police officers and private citizens working together in creative ways can help solve contemporary community problems related to crime, fear of crime, social and physical disorder, and neighbourhood decay. The philosophy … requires that police departments develop a new relationship with the law-abiding people in the community, allowing them a greater voice in setting local priorities, and involving them in efforts to improve the overall quality of life in their neighbourhoods. It shifts the focus of police work from handling random calls to solving problems.'

A workable definition of community policing offered by Freidmann (1992:26) will be used for the purpose of this article: 'Community policing is a policy and a strategy aimed at achieving more effective and efficient crime control, reduced fear of crime, improved quality of life, improved police service and police legitimacy, through a pro-active reliance on community resources that seeks to change crime causing conditions. It assumes a need for greater accountability of police, greater public share in decision-making and greater concerns for civil rights and liberties.'(As cited in Department of Criminology, 2004:4-25)

Based on the above definitions, Brogden and Nijhar (2005:23-24) identified five general propositions as the central guidelines of community policing. These include: neighbourhoods or small communities serving as the primary focus of police organisation and operations; communities have unique and distinctive policing problems that conventional police organisations and responses have not traditionally addressed; community consensus and structures should guide police response to the community's crime and security problems; policing should be both locally accountable and transparent; police discretion is a fact and should be used positively to maximise community confidence in the police. The spirit of those propositions is based on the ideas of the founder of the London Metropolitan Police Sir Robert Peel, who regarded policing as a practice by citizens in uniform and emphasised the local community contact and the ideal of policing by consent.

However, community policing is not a single concept. Fielding (1995) argues that it may mean 'a contrast to rapid response and enforcement oriented policing, so that constables are closer to the community and can represent its norms; a process by which crime control is shared with the public, as in Neighbourhood Watch; or the means of developing communication with the public and interest groups'. Bennett (1994) noted that the practice of community policing has developed at least six models: area based policing; multi-agency partnerships; community crime prevention; police-public contact strategies; area based foot patrols; and community involvement and consultation. Adamson (2004) pointed out that some of the components of such models can be: community constables; community liaison officers; schools liaison schemes; youth programmes; police consultative communities; local crime prevention initiatives; neighbourhood watch schemes; decentralised command structures; commitment to foot patrols; police public partnerships; and an emphasis on non-crime problem solving.

A research report on Community Based Policing Changes in New Deal for Communities (Adamson: 2004) highlighted several key lessons learnt from the recent implementation of different community based policing initiatives. Particularly, it was mentioned that satisfying

public demands for more police is unlikely alone to solve crime problems in an area. Partnerships should start by assessing the nature of problems to be addressed and consider the relevance of alternative policing solutions. Additional police resources provided to locally-based dedicated police teams can provide opportunities for proactive policing but are best used as part of a wider partnership problem solving approach to crime reduction. Formal Problem Oriented Policing (POP) approaches provide a useful structure for effective partnership working arrangements. Involving partners and the communities in the early stages to identify clear and detailed objectives and to divide responsibilities will pay later dividends in growing trust and ease of implementation.

Opponents of community policing argue that it will lead to too much community input which will prevent the police from upholding law and order. This argument regards community policing as the "tail wagging the dog"… (Marais:1992). However, experience of various community based policing initiatives mentioned later in this essay proves this argument to be wrong. In the foreword to the Green Paper (Home Office:2003a), the Home Secretary identified a need to transcend traditional notions of policing by consent with new principles of policing through co-operation. The National Policing Plan 2004-2007 (Home Office, 2003b) also made an emphasis on developing a model that 'places local priorities at the heart of community policing'. Since October 2003, a National Reassurance Policing Programme aimed at engaging the police with local communities and partner agencies was tried in 16 wards in eight police forces across England and Wales. After evaluation of the local management of community safety within the project areas, Singer (2004) came to the conclusion that 'running through each of the reassurance strands and the reassurance policing activity has been the idea of partnership in both defining the problems and determining the solutions. Instead of doing things for the community, local management of community safety has concentrated of doing things with local people – not simply to demonstrate a genuine concern and commitment but to form a new partnership where the community is empowered to direct the policing experts and officials.' (Singer, 2004:95).

As Lea (2000) pointed out, there is currently an increasing prominence of locally based crime prevention initiatives and community safety partnerships in which police and local authorities work together to reduce crime. These arrangements have been given a statutory basis under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. Some commentators have detected a noticeable shift in relationships between the police and the community in which police monopoly of expertise is no longer taken for granted, but rather 'the community and its leaders are to be involved in determining what are the policing needs of the locale, and what styles of police work are seen to be effective in these terms, and forms of intervention are regarded as desirable or undesirable.' (O'Malley and Palmer, 1996:145)

Morgan and Newburn (1997:156) argue that the police are fundamentally dependent on public trust, co-operation, and assistance regarding their knowledge of the incidence of crime and the identity of perpetrators if they are to be effective law enforcers. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary for Scotland Thematic Inspection Report on Community Engagement (2004) pointed out that recent developments in intelligence led policing and the application of the National Intelligence Model (NIM) have identified a crucial role of community information and community intelligence for effective policing. The South Lanarkshire Division case study shows that the flow of 'general information' received about the community from

members of the public, local councillors, community wardens and community groups, etc., and gathered by patrol officers, community officers and community inspectors enabled the problem solving unit to take account of all issues when analysing the problems and planning actions to address them.

Marais (1992) argued that community policing is unrealistic where communities are deeply divided and fraught with conflict. According to Marais, community policing implies some degree of consensus within a defined community as to what the main "disorder" problems are. Deep antagonisms and political intolerance cannot be dealt with in police-community forums. However, there is an evidence to suggest that a community based approach to policing proved to be very successful even in difficult areas and divided communities.

The 1999 Report of the Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland gives an example of the Markets Neighbourhood Policing Project that was set up in the predominantly nationalist/republican Markets area of Belfast. At that time, there was virtually no support for the police, and paramilitary organizations conducted their own 'patrols' in the area. Over eight years, the project team managed to build up support within the community and create a climate of mutual trust and respect. The elements of the team's success were common to successful community policing elsewhere in the world. They included: a dedicated policing team for a geographic area with foot patrolling as the predominant patrol method; respect and engaging with people of different backgrounds or political convictions; deployment of problem solving techniques; empowering the team to determine policing priorities in partnership with the community; patient and determined development of community activities; skilful use of discretion over minor offences, while maintaining a vigorous enforcement regime against more serious offences. Those and other methods brought results in terms both of crime reduction and improved community cohesion, thus enhanced community safety.

As Morgan and Newburn rightly pointed out:'Areas where community safety is conspicuous by its absence require a dedicated policing presence of persons who know the ground, who are trusted, and can work with other agencies to uplift the neighbourhood. It requires integral policing with local people. It requires the police seeking actively to overcome the deep hostility against them which in many areas has been allowed to build up as a result of withdrawal of integral policing and other public support services from neighbourhood'. (Morgan and Newburn, 1997:163-164)

That is why the community development element of community policing is particularly important for enhancing community safety. As Hope (1995) and Spencer (2000) pointed out, in strong communities which have developed stable relationships with representative institutions to ensure that residents' views are taken into account, and where there is little tolerance of crime and disorder as socially acceptable behaviour, there is more likely to be lower incidences of crime and victimisation. In contrast, in weak communities, where the population is likely to be more transient, the social networks are likely to be much less well developed and robust, due to people frequently moving in or out of the area for a range of reasons. In such communities, there is also more likely to be a sense of alienation and distance from society, with crime being viewed as a more acceptable form of behaviour. (Spencer, 2000:303)

The elimination of discriminatory practices and the enforcement of appropriate policing methods are fundamental to the delivery of effective policing. Community policing offers an opportunity to improve police relationships with ethnic minority communities. These had been damaged by the disproportionate impact of the search power on black and Asian young people. As FitzGerald (2001) pointed out, conceptually the emphasis on policing diversity contributes to the revitalisation of traditional principles of 'policing by consent'. Many of the concerns shared by local people regardless of ethnicity relate to issues of crime and disorder. From this perspective, the requirements of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 could actually present opportunities for breaking down suspicion and antagonism based on perceived ethnic difference (FitzGerald, 2001:164).

The Home Office testimony to Macpherson underlined commitment to the implementation of the Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary Thematic Inspection Report on Police Community and Race Relations which noted:
'...a greater awareness that the police cannot win the battle against crime without the support of the communities they serve. As communities become more plural, gaining their trust will require both improvements in the quality of service they receive and the adoption - as a core element of all policing activity - of a community focused strategy which recognises diversity... In effect this means that all the various components... of the police organisation should reflect a community and race relations element in their individual plans and strategies.'(Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary 1998: para 4)

It is at this point that the issue of statutory police accountability becomes important. Democratic control remains the only available alternative form of empowerment to those who lack political influence based on the control of economic resources. The establishment of '... a much more organised and rigorous system of local democratic accountability of the police is vital for... creating a political structure in which the most deprived sections of the working-class community can articulate their interests and grievances (which, in large measure, concern policing matters) (Lea and Young 1984: 231).

Addressing issues of democratic accountability, Crawford (1997) suggested the idea of proper forms of representation and the development of community based partnerships, structured to ensure the fullest participation of local people. However, the problem of crime prone communities with weak structures mentioned by Hope (1995) and Spencer (2000) still remains. Therefore, the idea of community policing remains vulnerable to criticism with respect to interest representation and to the limitations on community participation in critical decision-making. Influential minorities of communities may presume to speak for the whole community (Brogden and Nijhar (2005:54-56). This problem needs to be addressed through the community safety strategies that ensure an active share of the power across all participating groups, including the residents. These strategies should provide communities with a form of power sharing (for example, multi-agency community-based groups) that takes account of their concerns about crime and wider social and environmental improvement issues. According to Crawford (1997) it is empowering not only because it provides communities with a strong voice in the decision making process, but because it offers structures that can be seen as being democratically accountable at the local level, with the potential to be also democratically accountable at the regional and national level.

However, as Brogden and Nijhar (2005) pointed out, implementing (potentially contestable) initiatives in the name of community policing increases the risk of discriminatory law enforcement and police intrusion into private lives. The community consent to local policing might allow a majority of a given community to legitimise police practices for everyone else when these practices could end up oppressing the minority. Majorities may dominate minorities in the policing of communities, as elsewhere (Lea and Young, 1984). Although the 1994 Police and Criminal Evidence Act (PACE) attempted to find a balance between the fundamental issues of effective policing and the maintenance of human rights and liberties, new more direct forms of accountability should be developed to address this problem.

Smith (1987) argued that for various reasons, the idea of community policing has made little difference to the practice of policing and has not achieved the intended results. However, as findings of the evaluation of a contracted community policing experiment (the New Earswick project) shows, the problems may be not in the community policing itself, but in the way it is implemented. As Crawford et al. (2003) pointed out, a number of implementation difficulties resulted in the initiative's failure to meet its stated aims and hastened its early termination. The principal obstacles for success were: lack of clarity from the outset as to how police time was to be used, and the roles and responsibilities of the different partners; insufficient consideration given to what community policing would comprise and how it might achieve the project's aims; ineffective management of resident's expectations of what the project could realistically deliver; the manner in which the designated officer was drawn away from dedicated work within the village to cover for other colleagues or wider emergencies, since operational control remained within the police; considerable turnover of police staff – three different community officers filled the designated post, and four different police managers oversaw the project's implementation; lack of appropriate mechanisms of accounting for the service provided and the nature of any progress made. (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2003:1)

There are a number of important lessons to be learnt from the New Earswick experiment: in delivering community policing, a careful balance needs to be struck between the reactive duties of officers responding to incidents, and their more proactive roles of reassurance and crime prevention; community policing requires police forces to look to problem-oriented solutions which draw on community capacity and local knowledge, rather than relying on existing organisational remedies; consideration should be given to clarifying mechanisms and forms of accountability; seeking solutions to local problems through policing and security alone may serve to exacerbate residents' fears and solidify lines of difference within and among local communities (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2003:4)

The Home Office recently publicised several success stories of community based police practice. These included: Merseyside neighbourhood-focused policing that achieved a reduction in crime and an increase in public satisfaction; the Safer Neighbourhoods programme of the Metropolitan Police Service; effective police work with communities in Devon and Cornwall; the South Wales experience of partnership working to improve community safety and other examples of good practice. (Home Office, 2005) All those case studies demonstrate that community policing is not a soft option. To be successful, it requires hard work, dedication, ownership and commitment from all ranks and departments within the

police service, direct involvement and support of the community and other groups and individuals in the public, private and voluntary services.

Implemented properly, community policing would bring numerous benefits including the following. 'Community policing personalises policing – in the crime-fighting model the police have increasingly become anonymous stereotypes due to the influence of technology and an emphasis on motor patrols. Community policing reverses this trend. Community policing permits vital information gathering through face to face contacts – it enhances the quality of crime-fighting through street-level interaction and the information acquired from local people. Community policing minimises overreaction – by getting to know communities well, police are much less likely to overreact in encounters with the public, thereby diminishing hostile confrontations. Community policing allows police officers to target potentially violent people – because community police officers know the local residents well, they are able to identify and isolate potentially violent or troublesome individuals who may be a source of disturbance. Community policing enhances responsiveness – by establishing regular processes of consultation between the local police commander and communities, police actions can be more carefully aligned with the needs of communities, especially the (previously ignored) more mundane incidents, and intrusive matters (such as domestic disputes).

Community policing symbolises commitment – the activities involved in consulting, adapting to, and mobilising, show the public that the police care about a community. It is the most effective way for a police agency to obtain public support. Community policing develops informal social controls – by enlisting citizens in solving general community problems, it allows them to take more responsibility for their own destiny – by encouraging the development of tenants' groups, 'concerned parents' and so on. Community policing contributes to the quality of the physical environment – by responding to the 'signs of crime' – dumped cars, dangerous abandoned buildings, rubbish-strewn vacant sites, graffiti-painted walls, and broken street lights – not merely do officers inhibit the growth of crime by attending to such details, they also improve the social and physical quality of local life. Community policing helps to ensure a sense of wider democratic accountability – mobilising other government and voluntary agency resources to enhance the quality of life makes governments appear to be more responsive and accessible. Community policing positions police to monitor racial and ethnic tensions and mediate conflicts between different local groups.'(Brogden and Nijhar, 2005:39-40)

The benefits of community policing drawn by Brogden and Nijhar from the UK experience and good practice worldwide, advocate a positive impact on both, social and situational aspects of community safety, a reduction of crime and the fear of crime, improving the quality of life and enhancing community cohesion and participation in the democratic process. The complexity and flexibility of a community based approach to policing allows it to evolve together with society, thus ensuring a continuous improvement in community safety.

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