

# Crime Control Partnerships: who do we trust?

**Karen Evans** scrutinizes the reality and rhetoric of community as a focus of crime control.

In his recent book *Crime and Modernity*, John Lea has written that “The social foundation of modern crime control is that various types of conflicts have been handed over to the state to sort out”. However, in many areas of criminal justice and crime prevention policy it appears that the state is now handing back much of this responsibility. Policing, for example, is becoming increasingly privatised as security companies flourish and local authority financed community safety wardens proliferate. In addition, residential communities are increasingly encouraged to play a part in both the maintenance and restoration of order on our streets. Indeed the practice of involving and consulting with local communities in ‘the fight against crime’ was enshrined in New Labour’s flagship *Crime and Disorder Act of 1998* — and community participation has become an integral part of many policy initiatives, from involving local residents in helping the police to reduce the number of burglaries in their area, to giving victims a part to play in the criminal justice process. The particular rhetoric which has accompanied this move, and which has been perceived as driving policy in this direction, strongly suggests that crime should no longer be dealt with by expert agencies

structures which have been set up in local areas to oversee the design and implementation of community safety strategies. But can the professionals so easily give up the power and autonomy they have previously enjoyed and if they can, will local residents respond in a similar spirit of co-operation?

As both Lea and Young (Lea 2002) have argued, the professionalisation of society’s crime control function took place over many decades and was always more completely accepted in some areas than in others (Lea and Young 1984). Trusting to professional systems of policing and order maintenance was never universally accepted across all social groups and in all areas of the UK, however it reached its height in the post-war economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s - a period in which the dominant discourse claimed that social problems were retreating, the politics of welfare were in the ascendancy and stable economic and social conditions were able to provide an improved standard of living — in the west at least. Under these conditions it appeared that the ‘expert’ politicians and professionals were succeeding in constructing a fairer world in which quality of life and well-being would continue to improve for the majority of the population.

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and individuals alone but that the involvement of community-based organisations and individuals who are closer to the experiences of victimisation are better placed to find solutions.

Previous governments have emphasised the role of communities in self-surveillance of their areas (Neighbourhood Watch), advising and informing local policing priorities (Police Community Consultative Groups) and they have also been called upon to act as ‘the eyes and ears’ of the police (a phrase used in 1996 by former Conservative government minister Michael Howard). New Labour policy, however, has gone further than this in urging closer partnerships between the statutory, voluntary and community sectors and in ensuring that communities, whether based on areas of residence or shared interest, are regularly consulted on community safety strategies and project implementation. This signals a move away from using local knowledge merely to inform professional interventions from above and towards a more egalitarian model in which lay knowledge and community experience is to be given serious consideration and added weight in the decision-making process. At the same time there is an expectation that local residents will work closely with the police and other professionals involved in crime control, sharing their experiences, imparting intelligence and participating in the

However, the last thirty years has seen a downturn in many people’s fortunes as economic collapse has been followed by a net loss of employment, the retreat of the welfare state and growing social inequalities. The dream of the end of a history of social conflict and division, which has been pedalled at various times from the 1950s onwards, has well and truly dissolved. Much of the west has witnessed a rising crime rate and an ensuing political imperative for governments to be seen to be doing something to combat crime. This seemingly worsening situation lies behind current thinking and the eventual acknowledgement that professional systems alone cannot find a solution to ‘the crime problem’. But of course the move to involve communities in crime prevention also neatly fits the dominant neo-liberal agenda which holds individuals, and their families, responsible for their eventual fate and which denies the part played by inequalities which are woven into the structural fabric of society.

As social divisions have continued to grow “There has been an increasing polarization of income and wealth at the local level – producing... a greater spatial segregation between better off and poorer areas” (Hope 2002). Hope’s work has also shown that as poverty is increasingly concentrated in particular areas, so too is the experience of crime and victimisation. Under these



conditions it is not surprising that trust between the 'expert' and 'lay' communities is difficult to achieve. These groups do not share the same social spaces, experience the same environments of risk or economic stresses. But the consequences of high levels of mistrust are not hard to see. Trust is a key ingredient of civil society, it is necessary for the building of personal interrelationships and co-operation. Without trust people are suspicious of the intentions of others and withdraw from co-operation and collective action to personal self-advancement and the pursuit of self-interest. The issue of which individuals and organisations to trust, however, is a key consideration. There is ample evidence that 'experts' have often misunderstood or stereotyped 'problem communities', and in turn that the general population has withdrawn trust in professional judgements. Trust, we are reminded, must be earned and is more easily given to the 'insider' than to the 'outsider'.

In the absence of trust in professional expertise people look to more familiar social networks, privileging local knowledge and lay understandings over distant and professional explanations and solutions. These local understandings can be used to escape victimisation, to increase feelings of safety, to feel socially connected and to tap into relevant sources of local knowledge and experience (Walklate and Evans 1999). Certain professionals are more trusted than others. These are people who appear to listen, to spend time in the areas in which they intervene, who, at times, are willing to admit their own ignorance of local issues but who will act on advice from those who do have local experience. In sharp contrast, professionals are derided and criticized when they appear ignorant of local issues, do not take local residents' perspectives into account and fail to deliver on promises.

But what will it take for professionals to truly trust the

communities with which they are working? At present what is held up as community participation is often, in truth, little more than a co-option of local communities into established ways of understanding and dealing with criminality. Examples of real control and decision-making being passed over to communities are few and far between. While policy makers talk of 'active citizenship', 'self-help' and the shift from centralised policy to 'the new localism' (Wintour 2002) they still appear to accept community involvement only on their terms. This has to alter. More radically the professional crime control community must abandon its stereotyping of problem neighbourhoods and dangerous social groups and grasp the complexities and subtleties of local experiences of crime, criminality and victimisation.

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#### References:

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