

Standing at the crossroads: Community Safety Partnerships

Gordon Hughes highlights challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for CSPs following the Crime and Disorder Act Review.

This paper discusses some of the main challenges facing Community Safety Partnerships (CSPs) and local strategies in the wake of a number of central government-orchestrated initiatives in the last year, but most crucially for my purposes here the Home Office's *Crime and Disorder Act Review* published in January 2006 (of which I was a working group member). It is beyond the scope of this brief paper to: provide an academic audit of the past achievements and limitations of community safety partnerships and their local strategies; make the important distinctions between community safety, crime reduction and crime prevention; or to draw attention to the comparative geo-historical contexts of local safety strategies and their politics and a concomitant over-reliance on a national frame of reference.

The following discussion plots in brief some of the main strategic dilemmas, tensions and opportunities facing local community safety institutions and their strategic and operational practices following the *Crime and Disorder Act Review 2006* (CDAR) and related national policing initiatives discussed elsewhere in this edition of CJM. Five challenges are presented which are intended to stimulate further and fuller debate elsewhere. There are doubtless other challenges that I have missed in this brief provocation in the name of public debate across the worlds of policy, practice and academic research.

Political accountability and local democratic leadership

Historically CSPs have been largely insulated from local elected member involvement, never mind leadership and ownership. In the wake of the CDAR there is the ambition and intention to significantly improve local accountability of CSPs to elected politicians by means of the extension of the powers of both overview and scrutiny committees of local councils. It is also expected that the cabinet portfolio holder on community safety in the council will sit (and I would argue logically represent) the CSP on the newly empowered Local Strategic Partnership. This opens up a veritable 'Pandora's Box' of wicked issues around who controls the work and direction of CSPs – local officers/managers or politicians? – following the fissures initiated by the Local Government Acts of 1999 and 2000 (Hughes, forthcoming). Among the issues associated with this call for local political accountability and leadership are questions regarding the capacity and expertise of local councillors; the possibilities of a 'politics of law and order' and a visceral, punitive turning away from what have generally been 'adaptive', 'rational' strategies of prevention in most CSPs. Viewed more positively, this call may also open up much neglected normative debates about what are the ends and

public goods (and potential 'bads') of community safety as well as crime and disorder reduction. It is beholden on participants in public debate to weigh up relative costs and benefits in terms of individual freedoms and social justice of the 'preventive turn'. There is certainly an argument that the preventive turn in the UK has lacked local democratic ownership and not least symbolic leadership from elected representatives, perhaps when compared with parts of Europe (see the EU Domus project www.comune.it/domus/, and *Theoretical Criminology*, 2005).

'Beefing up' both the strategic and operational management of CSPs

It is now recognised by central government (and most CSPs) that there is a need for hierarchical governance and cross-agency senior ownership of partnerships. Following the CDAR, strategic control and leadership of community safety will be formally invested in Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) which are responsible for the delivery of statutory community plans, Local Area Agreements (LAAs) and 'safer, stronger communities' which is the latest re-coding of community safety/crime reduction. In formal terms the LAA is meant to be the meeting point of national and local priorities and the context where funding gets turned into outcomes (the elusive Midas touch of community safety in the last decade!). Meanwhile it is envisaged that the role and mission of CSPs will become that of operational delivery. It is fair to suggest that many CSPs and their key 'officer' players remain dubious as to the benefits of being controlled by this latest strategic, overarching partnership creation, the LSP. It is also common to hear of 'an avalanche of elected members' dominating LSPs and fears expressed of the likely playing of local party political 'games' from senior local government and police officers (managers who have until now effectively controlled the policy field). There are also worries locally that the tactical and strategic goals of community safety (especially crime reduction) will be lost in the broader agenda of community planning which drives the work of LSP and that community safety budgets may be diminished in practice. More optimistically, the integration of community safety into the broader terrain of renewal and community development may offer some potentially important pay-offs for the realisation of more inclusive and joined-up notions of community safety and harm reduction (as against the narrower, Home Office/police agenda of crime and disorder control).

Mechanisms for community engagement

According to the CDAR, Community Safety Partnerships need to become "more visible and more accountable to the communities they serve". Who could argue with this bottom-up communitarian motto? Of course there is nothing new about

appeals to community engagement in government crime control and public safety proposals. The recent history is strewn with both good intentions and a lack of tangible, long-lasting outcomes. Recent efforts, now revitalised as 'community capacity building', 'social capital' and 'community cohesion' etc, do not fill social scientist researchers with much enthusiasm, particularly when 'quick fix', often crude quantitatively measurable evidence is the general order of the day (arising out of managerial discourse being melded with communitarianism and political opportunism?). That said, there is no denying that CSPs and local police and government agencies more generally, past and present, have largely failed to engage with the unpredictable and difficult to tame 'beasts' that are local communities and neighbourhoods. Impossibilism (as in "there will always be failure as there is no such thing as 'community' in the modern world") is an easy opt-out clause for academic commentators but not for the often beleaguered activists, practitioners and practitioners who need to be seen to stay in the game. At times crumbs of comfort must suffice in the realpolitik of local partnership work. Viewed accordingly, some of the proposals contained in the CDAR may make some difference to the current participatory democratic deficit in the delivery and monitoring of local public services regarding public safety. However, without attention to resourcing and capacity issues for those tasked with this community engagement work, the consequences may be further demoralisation not just of 'hard-to-hear' groups and disgruntled majoritarian communities but also the designated community volunteers/leaders and the professional cadres of the new community governance. Scepticism over yet another 'suit' of 'emperor's new clothes' is widespread and not unwarranted. Minimally CSPs will be required to deliver six-monthly reports to 'their community'.

As ever behind this feel-good communitarian mantra is a series of difficult issues about which those on the 'ground' – such as local community safety practitioners and managers and local police officers – are only too aware. Among local practitioners the proposed 'trigger mechanism' (now known as 'community calls for action' in the recent central government discourse) has caused much alarm. The latter represents a formal way for communities to request action on community safety when there has been a clear failure by services to respond. The conduit for this call to communitarian-inspired action is to be the ward councillor who is tasked to make sure that appropriate action is taken. Already some local managers have feared that this initiative is a 'sound-bite' which has not been adequately thought through and may become unrepresentative, a 'nutters' charter' with no certainty that the so-called 'community call for action' is indicative of the broadly held concerns of local neighbourhoods. At the same time it is difficult to question the call for 'stronger' communities in the new local area agreements and the mandate for local strategic partnerships strategically, and CSPs operationally, to try to "empower local people to have a greater voice and influence over local decision-making and delivery of service" to quote a recent Home Office spokesperson's statement. A local solution to this current deficit cannot reside at the centre and its diktats. Local solutions are not just about 'rowing' as latter-day galley slaves, but also about strategic 'steering'. We await with interest to see how local policy coalitions, including I hope local academics in universities, will address these challenges and dilemmas and provide locally-nuanced solutions.

What are CDRPs/CSPs?

Section 5 of the Crime and Disorder Act of 1998 placed on police and local authorities a joint responsibility for the formulation of crime and disorder reduction strategies in each district, borough or unitary authority in England and Wales. The duty applies equally to county councils in two-tier areas. Section 6 of the Act required them to draw up and implement a strategy. This led to the formation of 376 Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs) across England and Wales. The terms CDRP and CSP (Community Safety Partnership) are often used interchangeably. In Wales, all are now called CSPs. Many if not most within the profession prefer the term CSP to CDRP, as it implies a wider and more inclusive approach to the set of problems being addressed.

Developments since the 1998 Act

Since the Act, there have been many developments in the field and in legislation. The duties of CDRPs have been extended to include tackling the misuse of drugs and anti-social behaviour. CDRPs have merged with Drug and Alcohol Teams (DATs) and full integration has taken place in Wales. Also, the 'responsible authority' family of agencies responsible for the local strategies has been widened to include police authorities, fire and primary care trusts. Partnerships are also expected to involve other local groups and agencies if they have something useful to contribute.

Many other changes have taken place in the context of community safety, including the development of Local Area Agreements (LAAs), changes in the Criminal Justice System (CJS) and the move towards neighbourhood policing.

The recent report of the Crime and Disorder Act Review (CDAR) is generally welcomed by the National Community Safety Network (NCSN). We feel the Government has listened to practitioners' and NCSN's concerns and the review has helped to clarify the respective roles of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) and CDRPs. Two-tier issues are acknowledged. We are pleased that the proposed new national standards are to be the subject of consultation.

However, we also have some concerns. It is unclear exactly what strategic functions will move from the CDRP to the Local Strategy Partnerships and whether or not this will diminish the role of Community Safety Managers.

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Beyond the local: contrariness of central government's efforts at joining itself up!

It is clear that there are also inconsistencies at central government level about what community safety is about, especially regarding neighbourhood renewal, social exclusion and joined up government and the debate on local strategic partnerships as against the more focused and narrow policing agenda on both crime and disorder reduction and neighbourhood policing (Hughes, forthcoming). Indeed there is a strong sense in the community safety world that the neighbourhood policing programme is akin to a battalion of tanks about to ride roughshod over the local community safety infantry and their struggle for community involvement. One possibility is that community involvement will become synonymous with and reducible to 'better' neighbourhood public policing, such as gathering 'community information' for National Intelligence Model purposes. However, another possibility is that the more expansive social inclusion and civil and urban renewal agendas may represent an important option for a revitalised, future 'social crime prevention' route if and when CDRPs become increasingly enmeshed within networks of neighbourhood renewal (Gilling, 2005: 746).

Among others, I have argued that this more expansive, social inclusionist agenda for community safety is one to be supported, albeit with reservations about the possible 'criminalisation of social policy' and potential Orwellian extension of the processes of formal crime control into the institutions of informal social control and socialisation such as schools, youth facilities and families. At the same time, there has been a strong tendency for the community safety buck to stop with evidence of crime reduction and thus with a narrow police agenda at both the central and local levels of government. Although the odds are against a sea change in views on 'what works' in community safety, there are possibilities that initiatives such as the LAAs and the blocks within them may help 'responsibilise' a broader group of central government departments (beyond the Home Office) in the 'new' approach. Such a shift to joined-up thinking at central government level is hard to envisage, but it is vital that its potential is recognised and that academic evaluation for evidence-based outcomes and priorities is done.

Implications for research

Finally it is hardly unexpected for the academic researcher to suggest that all these challenges require further rigorous research and analysis! Doubtless impact evaluation is needed but we also need to 'drill down' in research terms into localities and specific contexts with a challenging mixed methodological approach and long-term role for 'public intellectuals' at local and regional as well as national and international levels to commit to this difficult work where the devil is in the (contextual) detail. This represents an exciting future for a comparative, publicly engaged criminology of community safety.



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