



COMMUNITY POLICING

Continuing support for community policing

There are not many people who would say that they do not want community policing. It would be similar to saying that you do not want inter-agency cooperation or that you do not want partnerships in crime prevention. It is almost like saying that you do not want the world to be a better place. The reason for this support seems to lie less in the years of experience of practical benefits from community policing than in the comforting imagery that the concept conveys. Manning (1984) believes that community policing evokes a sense of nostalgia and represents an attempt to recapture an imagined past. Ericson et al. (1993) note the importance of the word 'community' which they argue is a 'hurrah word' which seems never to be used negatively.

Declarations of support for community policing are wide ranging. The government gave official support for community policing in its White Paper *Police Reform* (HMSO, 1993). The police have pledged support for community policing in the *Operational Police Review* (The Joint Consultative Committee, 1990) and in the *ACPO Strategic Policy Document* (ACPO, 1990) in which the authors stress the importance of the service role of the police and the commitment of the police to reflect the priorities of the public in the actions that they take. The public have offered their support for community policing in their demands for more foot patrol officers on the beat and their interest in more collaborative policing responsive to local needs.

There are three important problems which currently hinder efforts to convert the obvious support for community policing into practice: the first is that it is not clear what community policing is; the second is that it is not clear what community policing is supposed to achieve; and the third is that it is not clear whether community policing is effective in achieving any of its possible goals.

What is it?

It is perhaps surprising that, despite the fact that everyone seems to want community policing, there is relatively little agreement about what community policing is.



Kirsty Cunningham

Recent books and articles containing the term 'community policing' in their titles cover a wide range of conceptions of community policing including: community policing as public relations, community policing as information brokerage, and community policing as empty rhetoric; and cover a wide range of programmes including: community meetings, foot patrols and community crime prevention.

The most recent reports on community policing in the academic literature seem to converge on the idea that community policing is fundamentally a philosophy of policing which defines the nature of a new kind of relationship between the police and the public. Some writers have interpreted this relationship to be largely symbolic, as described above. However, others have identified more practical components of this relationship including the view that the police should consult and collaborate with the public on policing matters (Bennett, 1994).

While community policing is seen fundamentally as a policing philosophy, it is believed to be implemented through practical organisation and operational strategies. The most popular organisational strategy is 'decentralisation', which in Britain at the moment comes under the heading of 'sectorisation' or 'sector policing'. The Metropolitan Police have begun a process of implementing sector policing force-wide and many other forces have begun implementing either force-wide or local versions of sector policing

(Bennett and Lupton, 1992). The most popular operational strategies implemented within community policing are: foot patrols, community beat officers, community meetings, contact strategies (such as police shops and mini-stations), and community crime prevention.

What is it supposed to achieve?

Informal conversations with police officers suggest that the aims of community policing in many police forces are defined very broadly and often vary between and within forces. Comments on the aims of foot patrol officers and community constables found in the literature include: public contact, public reassurance, deterrence, prevention, and intelligence gathering (Bennett and Lupton, 1992). Statements of the aims of community policing (or related concepts) found in police force annual reports typically refer to crime and fear prevention along with more general notions of creating a tranquil and safe environment (Bennett, 1994).

Does it work?

It would be reasonable to assume that the immense interest and support for community policing is a product of its proven effectiveness. However, more than a decade of research on community policing has generated very little evidence to show that community policing can be implemented effectively or that it can achieve its outcome goals.



COMMUNITY POLICING

One of the earliest attempts at implementing sector policing in Britain (at least in its modern form) found substantial evidence of implementation failure at all levels of the programme (Irving et al., 1989). An evaluation of one of the new policing sectors in the Metropolitan Police District concluded that the programme failed to be implemented properly as officers were frequently taken off their sectors to conduct duties in other parts of the division and had little time to develop any sense of loyalty to their own sector (Dixon and Stanko, 1993). Other studies have shown that it is difficult to change existing policing philosophies and practices and attempts to do so often result in passive resistance or even sabotage among lower-ranking officers.

The issue of whether community policing can reduce crime and fear of crime has not yet been adequately resolved in the research literature. The study of neighbourhood policing in Notting Hill in London mentioned earlier found that the number of victimisations increased following the implementation of the programme (Irving et al., 1989). A recent evaluation of sector policing and problem-oriented policing in Thames Valley showed no reduction in crime during the first 18 months of the programme (Bennett and Kemp, 1994). Research on the crime prevention effectiveness of decentralisation and team policing in the United States has also produced few positive results.

Conclusion

It would be wrong to conclude that the results of research on community policing are wholly negative, as there are examples of programmes which have been implemented well and which have achieved some evidence of success. However, the results are sufficiently discouraging and throw up a sufficient number of questions to suggest that what is said and what is done in relation to community policing should be considered very carefully. The obvious attractions of the idea and the comforting imagery of the concept should not be allowed to detract from the serious task of deciding the best possible future direction for policing in this country. These developments would be assisted most effectively by controlled trials and dissemination of results. Without the former, it would be difficult to determine what works, where, and under what conditions; and without the latter there would be little chance to learn from mistakes. Without either the future of community policing is in danger of falling on the wrong side of the divide between comforting rhetoric and harsh reality.

Trevor Bennett is lecturer in criminology at the University of Cambridge, Institute of Criminology.

References

ACPO (1990) *ACPO Strategic Policy Document: Setting the Standards for Policing: Meeting Community Expectations*. Report of an ACPO Working Party, London: ACPO.

Bennett, T.H. and Kemp, C. (1994). *An Evaluation of Sector-Based Problem-Oriented Policing in Thames Valley Police Force Area*. Report to the Home Office Research and Planning Unit. Cambridge: Institute of Criminology.

Bennett, T.H. (1994) 'Community policing on the ground: developments in Britain'. In: Rosenbaum, D. (Ed.) *The Challenge of Community Policing: Testing the Promises*. London: Sage.

Bennett, T.H. and Lupton, R. (1992). A survey of the allocation and use of community constables in England and Wales. *British Journal of Criminology*, 32, 2, 167-182.

Dixon, B. and Stanko, E. (1993) *Serving the People: Sector Policing and Public Accountability*. Middlesex: Centre for Criminal Justice Research, Brunel University.

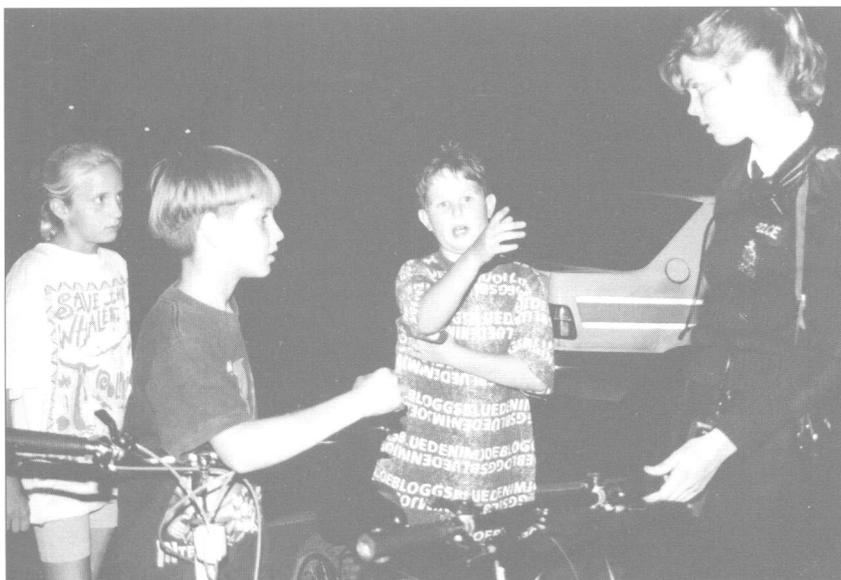
Ericson, R. (1993) 'Community Policing as Communications Policing'. In: D. Dolling and T. Feltes (Eds.) *Comparative Aspects of Community-Oriented Police Work*. Holzkirchen: Felix-Verlag.

HMSO (1993) *Police Reform: A Police Service for the Twenty-First Century*. Government White Paper. Command 2281, London: HMSO.

Irving, B., Bird, C., Hibberd, M. and Willmore, J. (1989) *Neighbourhood Policing: The Natural History of a Policing Experiment*. London: The Police Foundation.

Manning, P.K. (1984) 'Community Policing', *American Journal of Police*, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 205-227.

The Joint Consultative Committee (1990) *Operational Policing Review*. Surrey: The Joint Consultative Committee.



Kirsty Cunningham