The public face of policing

Martin Innes explains the success of reassurance programmes.

"What kind of police service do we want?" This question was posed by Sir Ian Blair, Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, at the start of his Richard Dimbleby lecture in November 2005. But in two ways it is akin to what conjurors (masters of the art of manipulating perception) term a 'misdirection.' First, it presumes to know what policing does and can do. And whilst many claims are made about the policing of a range of public and private situations, robust empirical research detailing the impacts of police practices upon the fabrication of social order are frequently lacking. Following C. Wright Mills's (1959) more general critique, there is much 'grand theorising' and 'abstracted empiricism' in writing on policing, but conceptually informed studies of specific, situated police practices and how they are accomplished remain comparatively rare. Second, Blair's question pretends that we do not know what the public wants from policing. When, for four decades now, opinion surveys have repeatedly found that the public desires increased visibility, responsiveness and effectiveness. And yet, despite such evidence, senior officers over the years have argued to the contrary, on the basis that the public are ill-informed and do not understand the pressures and complexities of policing contemporary communities.

In January 2006, the Home Office published the results of its outcome evaluation of the National Reassurance Policing Programme (NRPP). Initiated in April 2003 in 16 trial sites throughout England, following pilot projects in Surrey and London, the NRPP was designed to develop and test a new style of reassurance policing. Importantly, research was a core element of the programme seeking to measure programme outcomes and also develop an empirical knowledge base to inform police conduct 'on the ground.' From the outset, the NRPP took seriously the previously noted public demand for increased visibility and responsiveness in the delivery of policing. The results of the Home Office evaluation found "the programme overall had a positive impact on crime, perceptions of crime and antisocial behaviour, feelings of safety and public confidence in the police" (Tuffin *et al*, 2006: ix).

How were these results achieved?

The NRPP approach was built upon three key components:
1. Police officers need to be visible, accessible, familiar and effective in order to provide a reassuring presence in neighbourhoods. Early research conducted for the NRPP showed that visibility was a necessary but not sufficient condition for reassuring communities, and that local people also want to see police addressing the problems that matter to them.
2. Police resources should focus upon the signal crimes and disorders that act as 'drivers' of insecurity in neighbourhoods. Signal crimes and disorders are deviant acts, or their material traces, that connote the presence of other risks, impacting upon how individuals and groups think, feel or act in relation to their security.
3. Communities themselves and other agencies have to be involved in tackling local problems.

These three components were configured slightly differently according to the profiles and problems of individual neighbourhoods, but they functioned in mutually supporting ways in delivering policing designed to influence both the objective and subjective dimensions of neighbourhood security. In effect, the reassurance policing process worked in different ways in different settings. In the more deprived, high crime, high disorder trial sites, it was tackling the signal crimes and signal disorders that made people feel safer. Whereas, in more affluent sites, what made the difference was the process of engagement and involving a community in choosing the focus of local policing efforts.

Engagement and community choice are the core of reassurance policing. Systematic engagement processes raised visibility, accessibility and familiarity, but also facilitated the diagnosis of signal crimes and disorders in an area, because only local people themselves can determine whether an incident signals risk and threat to them. Unlike previous iterations of community policing where police tended to wait for people to come to them by, for example, organising local community meetings, under NRPP, local officers and PCSOs had to proactively go to members of the public to find out what the local troubles were – a method introducing a different dimension into the relations between police and citizens.

Allied to the emphasis on systematic proactive engagement was the importance of public choice. Once the range of signal crimes and disorders influencing perceptions of security in an area were diagnosed, then local communities were asked to choose which issues they wanted their local police team to focus upon for a defined period. This democratic input was a necessary step for managing demand, but interestingly, across the 16 trial sites, no community refused to make such choices.

The particular innovation of the NRPP was to think in terms of signals and how certain incidents are important to individuals and groups because they indicate the potential presence of other risks. Research demonstrated that disorder, as well as crime incidents, often performed this signalling role in communities (Innes, 2004). But whereas in previous formulations, such as Wilson and Kelling's (1982) 'broken windows thesis', the accent was upon explaining the 'criminogenic' properties of disorder and how it causes more serious crime in an area. The 'Signal Crimes Perspective' (SCP) as it has become known, seeks to explain why certain acts of crime and disorder generate insecurity, but other ostensibly similar incidents have no significant impact. A perspective is a 'way of seeing', and this is precisely what the SCP seeks to provide – a different way of looking at crime and disorder problems, and the harms that they induce.

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Integrating theoretical insights in this way was important because community policing and related initiatives, including previous permutations of reassurance policing, have largely been disconnected from consideration of wider social-psychological and sociological theories of social influence, and how people interpret and make sense of the environments in which they are situated. In contrast, the strategies and practices designed for the NRPP were fully informed by insights from such approaches, although this has not, as yet, been fully acknowledged by commentators.

Moreover, unlike many previous articulations of police strategy, the NRPP, in recognising that the foundations of effective social control are often dependent upon the condition of communities themselves, also attended to thinking about the inter-relationships between the conduct of policing and the capacity for informal social control of problems. In several of the research sites what seems to have happened is that by tackling the crimes and disorders that were signalling risk and threat to people, the police created a basic level of security that encouraged local community associations and other groups to intervene more actively in regulating behaviour in public and parochial spaces. Police efforts, and those of related agencies and communities, were directed to those incidents that had a high profile and visibility in each area. In better managing these problems, people's impressions and perceptions of risk and threat were modified, and their security enhanced.

As an integral part of their interventions, police were encouraged to think about the 'control signals' sent by their conduct and in every aspect of their work to be aware of the messages they might be conveying to the communities in which they were located. It would be wrong to dismiss this as just 'spin', because on many occasions it was altering the material conditions and enforcing the law against entrenched crime and disorder problems that resulted in the improvements. But it does show that symbols, signals and impression management matter very much in terms of understanding how policing and social control is received by the public.

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