Evaluation of Police-Community Engagement Practices

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Background

Principles of community engagement, which coalesce around the idea of police working with local communities, have become increasing influential within contemporary policing. Done well, 'community engagement' can foster constructive dialogue, mutually beneficial and collaborative relations between police and citizens and communities to identify and tackle local issues of crime, disorder and neighbourhood safety. This evaluation explored how a team of neighbourhood officers sought to engage the local community within its routine duties.

Key Findings

- Although there was evidence of neighbourhood officers working well with some local community members and groups, this activity appeared to be fairly scarce and was happening mostly in a fragmented, piecemeal and ad hoc manner.

- Police-community engagement activity was mostly focused on those ethnic groups that were more established in the local area and 'easier to reach' on account of them having more communal and social meeting places and more visible community leaders for the police to establish links with.

- Police-community engagement activity was mostly limited in its ambition, focusing on forms of working that were 'consultative' and 'cooperative' rather than 'coordinated' or 'collaborative'. For instance, it was often directed towards 'information gathering' for law enforcement purposes rather than 'problem-solving' for preventative purposes.

- Knowledge of local communities, of the capacities and capabilities they might bring to the co-production of safety, was mostly collated, held and acted on by individual officers, rather than through institutional and strategically designed processes.

- Officers felt that engaging local communities in dialogue and discussion about local policing issues was important, but described how devoting time to this activity had become increasingly difficult given other priorities, particularly the pressing nature of concurrent demands they were routinely tasked with responding to.

- Officers felt that public trust and confidence in the police, which they perceived as the bedrock of effective community engagement, at times could be undermined and disrupted by the more coercive nature of the force's wider law enforcement activities.

- The challenges for police of engaging local communities in policing are sizeable and shaped by an array of internal (or 'organisational') and external (or 'environmental') factors. Responding to these challenges initially requires police forces to identify the enabling or constraining tendencies of their structures, cultures and workforce.

Introduction

This study represents one strand of an ESRC funded 'Knowledge Exchange Opportunities Scheme' project that explored innovative models of research co-production and knowledge translation. The project was a collaboration of a team of researchers at the University of Leeds and West Yorkshire Police (WYP) together with the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for West Yorkshire (OPCCWY).

Background

The study reflects the increasing prominence of 'community engagement' within British policing, particularly since the advent of 'neighbourhood policing' over a decade ago. Although there is little new in the idea that police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy can be enhanced where citizens and communities are involved in policing, it has attracted renewed attention in the current era of economic austerity, increasing social and cultural diversity of local communities and changing crime and security risks. Greater public participation in policing can serve multiple purposes such as identifying local concerns and priorities, informing communities of police plans, strategies and activities, gathering information on crime and disorder incidents and risks to local security, and gaining the help of communities in addressing local problems of crime and disorder. As a consequence, a wide range of benefits may accrue, including increased crime reduction, reduced fear of crime and enhanced perceptions of neighbourhood safety.

Methods and Data Collection

The research took place in the Harehills area of Leeds, part of the Inner-East police area of the city. Data were collected from interviews with senior managers (x2) and representatives of community groups (x3), and from focus groups with Constables and Police Community Support Officers (x4), as well as from force level policy edicts.

The practice of community engagement

Although there was evidence of local officers working well with some community members and groups, this activity appeared to be fairly scarce and was happening mostly in a fragmented, piecemeal and ad hoc manner. On the one-hand this is perhaps surprising given the value the force places on neighbourhood teams engaging local communities; on the other hand it is perhaps less so given the recurrent challenges of implementing community-orientated policing, particularly in areas – such as Harehills – that have high levels of economic deprivation, resident transience and ethnic diversity among the local population. These conditions present sizeable challenges for officers attempting to engage with and mobilise local communities. Given this difficult context, officers tended to direct their engagement efforts towards those ethnic groups that were well established in the local area and 'easier to reach' on account of them having more communal and social meeting places and more visible community leaders for the police to establish links with.

Most community engagement activity was limited in its ambition, focusing on forms of working that were 'consultative' and 'cooperative' rather than 'coordinated' or 'collaborative'. For instance, it was often directed towards 'information gathering' for law enforcement purposes rather than 'problem-solving' for preventative purposes. As a consequence, officers

appeared to direct their efforts more towards developing locally-embedded individual contacts than courting community groups for shared (and more pro-social) endeavours. Indicative of this, some officers had insufficient knowledge of local community groups to enable them to harness the capacities and resources of the community to contribute to policing and enhance public safety. This, in turn, reflects how knowledge of local communities and the capacities and capabilities they might bring to the co-production of safety was mostly collated, held and acted on by individual 'frontline' officers, rather than through institutional and strategically designed processes. Such an approach risks the loss of valuable local knowledge when officers move, either horizontally or vertically, both within and without the force, but it also places too great an emphasis on the qualities of those individuals who are tasked with engaging communities. Adopting a more systematic method of identifying and mapping community-based groups (or neighbourhood assets') would mitigate this risk, but also strengthen the *process* of community engagement.

Enabling community engagement

The challenges of community engagement are sizeable and shaped by an array of internal (or 'organisational') and external (or 'environmental') factors. The latter include the social, economic and cultural conditions of a local neighbourhood which shape local demands on police, as well as police-community relations more broadly; the former include the organisation's structures, cultures and workforce, which serve to enable or constrain the practice of community engagement. Identifying the

influence of these factors is of course a pre-requisite for policy changes designed to overcome any barriers to implementation.

Whilst officers said that they recognised the importance of working with local communities, they felt several 'organisational' issues served to hamper this activity. First, the myriad of other pressing duties they were tasked with daily, which not only reduced the time officers could spend engaging local communities, but also disrupted their planned activities. Significantly, the volume of these wider duties, they felt, had increased markedly owing to the resource implications of recent budget cuts. Second, the vicissitudes of police deployment patterns which – owing to unforeseeable spikes in demand elsewhere – could abstract them away from 'their' allocated neighbourhood. Third, the fluctuations of the police shift system, which could take them off-duty for periods of time that were unconducive to the needs of the community. Fourth, the performance management regime which is not calibrated for measuring the often diffuse outcomes associated with community engagement. Fifth, the force's law enforcement and order maintenance responsibilities, which if pursued in isolation of the priorities of community engagement, could undermine public trust and confidence. This highlights a major tension that local officers routinely had to negotiate – whilst they saw 'community engagement' as enabling of the force's 'crime fighting' responsibilities (e.g. via intelligence gathering), they felt simultaneously that 'crime fighting' activities served to constrain the success of their 'community engagement' efforts. Reconciling these at times competing agendas is a key challenge for police forces.

Skills, Competencies and Training

Partly attributable to the roll-out of neighbourhood policing over the last decade, 'community engagement' has become an increasingly generic responsibility of 'frontline' officers. Yet, most officers felt that its implementation required specific expertise and knowledge which lent itself to the development of innovative, flexible and tailored approaches. It was, they therefore felt, unrealistic to expect achievable outcomes if this responsibility was left to officers who lacked the necessary experience, competencies and training. The implications are, first, that this skill set should be developed through formal training provisions; and second, that a specialist, 'horses for courses', approach be adopted, which considers the suitability of individual staff for this type of challenging work.

The greater emphasis within the force on community engagement, however, has not been accompanied by corresponding investment in bespoke training. Related, officers felt some uncertainty over the purposes, priorities and practices of community engagement. A perceived lack of guidance on these matters – from both the wider force and immediate supervisors – added to this uncertainty. As a result, officers felt they were largely 'left to get on with it' as they saw fit, albeit only when other duties allowed them to do so. Yet, 'community engagement', as a concept, was interpreted by officers in multiple ways – not least as it was felt to harbour a range of purposes and processes. The danger is that 'deeper', more sophisticated and ambitious forms of community engagement, such as collaborative and longer term enterprises aimed at the co-production of neighbourhood safety, become side-lined. In short, there is scope for the force to clarify a suite of options that respond to the 'what', 'why', and 'how' questions of this approach to policing.

Conclusions

The findings of this study have drawn attention to the challenges confronting police forces if they wish neighbourhood policing teams to deliver meaningful and effective community engagement. They emphasise how short-term imperatives, and wider contingencies, which understandably come to dominate police resource allocation systems, serve to structure, and constrain, the nature and extent of practices aimed at engaging local communities. Although the nature of the case study area presented acute challenges for those local officers tasked, there is little reason to suppose the findings are not transferable to other areas within and without the force. Nonetheless, there are a range of implications that flow from the findings, which police managers might seek to act on in order to reconcile competing organisational imperatives and, in so doing, address some of the limitations and inconsistencies of current practice identified within this study.

Acknowledgements and Further Information