



**Australian Government**

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## **Community Policing: A descriptive overview**

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Community policing is a term firmly ensconced in the lexicon of Australian policing. But what exactly is it? Although a phrase commonly used within both the criminal justice system and the public domain, it remains many things to many people. This paper examines the origins and central tenants of community policing and identifies pertinent issues for consideration regarding the future of community policing as a mechanism for crime control.

Community policing began to appear in both the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) during the early 1980s (Kelling & Moore, 1988; Rosenbaum, 1998). The global adoption of community policing that followed was reflective of a paradigm shift within many policing organisations from the professional era to the community era (Thurman et al, 2001). Community policing has been enthusiastically received and readily implemented by communities and policing organisations alike over recent decades to an unprecedented extent. Examples of community policing can be found in Singapore, the UK, Canada, Australia and most noticeably in the US. This paper will discuss the main concepts of community policing and explore some of the key issues and future challenges faced as community policing makes the transition to becoming a legitimate policing philosophy.

### **Community Policing: The background**

The shift to community policing occurred in an environment in which existing policing practices were subject to increasing criticism, fostering a willingness to consider alternative approaches. The driving forces for change were both internal and external, were common across many police organisations and were of both a social and environmental nature. Key factors are presented in Table One.

**Table 1: Community policing catalysts**

<b>Key factor</b>	<b>Contributing elements</b>
<i>Recognition of public support as critical to police effectiveness</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• effective police operations are dependent upon public support both in terms of the provision of essential intelligence to the police and for respecting law and order in general</li><li>• positive community perceptions of police legitimacy have been linked to low levels of crime (Grabosky, 1992; Sherman &amp; Eck, 2002)</li></ul>
<i>Criticisms of the existing (professional) paradigm &amp; current practices</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• inability to recognise and respond to contemporary community concerns</li><li>• existing activities that almost exclusively emphasised law and order, identified as both ineffective and misguided (Thurman et al, 2001; Hahn, 1998)</li><li>• traditional methods of addressing crime concerns such as increasing police numbers, were found to be unsuccessful at effecting long-term crime reduction (Bayley, 1994)</li></ul>
<i>Police can perform a wide range of functions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• police can utilise their capacity to perform a wide range of functions to enable essential community links to be established (Thurman et al, 2001)</li><li>• initiatives created to encourage the development and maintenance of police-community partnerships to make police practice more relevant to community problems and needs (Crawford, 1997; Hahn, 1998)</li></ul>
<i>Returning responsibility to the community</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• the shift in focus on communities was present in many areas of criminal justice and other fields of governance (Ericson &amp; Haggerty, 1997).</li><li>• individuals and organisations in the community were encouraged to take responsibility for concerns such as crime prevention and security (Jones &amp; Newburn, 2002)</li></ul>
<i>Changing nature of 'communities'</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• increasing urban sprawl (especially relevant in Australian cities and regional centres)</li><li>• rising phenomenon of 'dormitory suburbs' that empty during the day as residents travel to work and school (Edwards, 1999)</li><li>• in many cases, these changes lead to a decline in community cohesiveness (for example, decreased participation in community activities) and often to a subsequent increase in social and physical disorder as community members spent limited time on community maintenance and improvement (Crawford, 1995)</li></ul>
<i>Public demand for police accountability</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• increase in the cost of crime and a simultaneous shift in accountability demanded policing organisations justify their performance</li><li>• policing organisations had to rethink the appropriateness and effectiveness of traditional practices in light of lack of evidence to support exclusive investment in traditional practices (Edwards, 1999)</li></ul>

The combined effect of the key forces identified in Table One, led to contemporary policing practice and organisational structure being re-examined, resulting in many places in the development and adoption of the community policing paradigm. If these social and environmental drivers were not sufficient to precipitate a change in approach, political drivers added the final driving punch in countries such as the UK and the US<sup>1</sup>.

## **What is community policing?**

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Essentially, community policing is about police engagement with the community, through restructuring police organisations and altering the daily activities of operational police officers. However the implementation of community policing on the ground has resulted in community policing being “many things to many people” (Cordner 1998; see also Mastrofski, 1998). As such, an accepted definition remains elusive (see Moir & Moir, 1992; Fielding 1995). In its purest form, community policing can simultaneously be defined as a philosophy and an organisational strategy (see for example Trojanowicz & Bucqueroux, 1990). Central to the philosophy of community policing is the emphasis on effective working partnerships with the community (see Peak & Glensor, 1999).

Despite the varied manifestations of community policing as it is adopted and implemented internationally, it is possible to identify some common elements to provide a more comprehensive picture of what community policing entails.

## **Common elements**

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A frequently used structure to frame the impact community policing is intended to have at different points in policing organisations is that developed by Cordner (1998). Cordner identified four ‘dimensions’ of community policing, encompassing both the less tangible philosophical elements as well as the practical elements of community policing.

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<sup>1</sup> see Edwards, 1999; Zhao et al, 1999 and for a discussion of the Australian context, Jones & Newburn, 2002.

## **Philosophical**

The philosophical elements of community policing are crucial to its implementation, as without an understanding and commitment to the central tenants of community policing both the implementation and the potential benefits to be gained will be limited. These elements include:

- the community as the key priority for police work (Rosenbaum, 1998);
- the community as central to the identification and response to crime and safety concerns (Moore, 1992), and;
- broadening the police role (Bennett, 1998).

## **Strategic**

Cordner defines the strategic dimension of community policing as including the “key operational concepts that translate philosophy into action”, linking the broad ideas and beliefs of community policing to the specific programs and practices that are implemented (1998: 48). Community policing impacts upon the strategic direction and operations of policing organisations through:

- expanding the role and duties of police officers to enable them to think more laterally, to engage in both proactive and follow-up activities and to provide a more personalised service delivery;
- redeveloping police activities and operations for example, through reorienting operations to focus less on patrol and more on local problem solving, crime prevention education, and developing positive relationships with youth (Moore, 1992; Rosenbaum, 1998);
- emphasising prevention, focusing on long-term benefits and reconceptualizing how the impact of police work is measured beyond crime rates and clearance rates (for example focusing on community perception of safety and attitudes towards law enforcement); and
- developing a more localised, community-specific focus for officers to generate a sense of accountability and responsibility for specific areas.

## **Tactical**

The tactical elements of community policing are the concrete programs and practices that are implemented. These have been wide in scope and varied considerably between organisations and have included:

- establishing community partnerships, through public relations/media campaigns, shopfront and mini-police stations, Neighbourhood Watch (see Bayley, 1999; Moore, 1992; Rosenbaum et al, 1998), and;
- developing problem-solving techniques to address the underlying causes of identified issues, achieved through training officers to recognise problems and to be knowledgeable regarding possible ways to address them & officers working with the community to identify problems, for example through community meetings (see Bayley, 1999; Moore, 1992; Rosenbaum et al, 1998).

## **Organisational**

Organisational level support is essential to community policing and includes:

- decentralising police services, empowering officer's to work independently;
- extending the management role to include mentoring and close supervision; and
- shifting the focus to include qualitative information for evaluative processes (including performance appraisal), rather than traditional quantitative indicators (Greene, 1998).

## **Potential benefits**

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Those advocating the adoption of community policing have identified a wide array of potential benefits. The major arguments can be loosely organised to include:

### *Community-specific advantages*

- the mobilisation and empowerment of communities to identify and respond to concerns;

- a reduction in problems and issues of concern as they are prioritised and addressed;
- an improved local physical and social environment;
- an increase in positive community attitudes towards police; and
- reduced fear of crime.

*Police-specific benefits*

- an improved police-community relationship;
- an improved community perception of police 'legitimacy'; and
- an increase in officer satisfaction with their work.

*Shared benefits*

- a decreased potential for police-citizen conflict;
- a reduction in crime rates;
- a better flow of information between the police and the community, and;
- better implementation of crime prevention and crime control activities, as a result of both parties working together towards shared goals.

(see Hahn, 1998; Thurman et al, 2001; Fielding, 1995; Sherman & Eck, 2002)

## **Implementing Community Policing: Lessons learned & problems for consideration**

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As with every coin, there are two sides. Informal and formal evaluations of community policing initiatives have identified problems and challenges that arise in the process of implementing community policing. While evaluations vary in their complexity and focus, a number of common implementation problems can be identified. Although these problems often manifest themselves during the implementation process, many stem from the foundations upon which initiatives are based and reflect problems relating to how community policing is understood and the organisational support structure upon which it is built. It is essential that practitioners are aware of these potential impediments to the implementation of community policing for the development of future initiatives (Cunneen, 1992).

### *Organisational support*

Active support for community policing at every level of policing organisations has been identified as essential to its successful implementation. Beyond the rhetoric, attention needs to be paid to implementation of community policing to ensure that community policing is understood, supported, practiced and prioritised by the whole organisation (Cameron & Laycock, 2002; Moore, 1992; Thurman et al, 2001; Sarre, 1997). An initiative adopted and implemented in South Australia in the early 1990s, Project Benchmark, found that where organisational support was nonexistent, the effectiveness of community policing was compromised (Saul, 1997).

### *Community policing as an ancillary to policing practice*

Within Australia, community policing has tended to “remain an ancillary activity rather than part of core police work”, reflecting an international trend that has been the subject of much criticism (Brereton, 2000: 124). While some identify specialised models (i.e. isolated initiatives) as an important step towards the adoption of community policing as a generalised whole-organisation model, others argue that locating isolated initiatives and practices outside general duties activities is detrimental to the development of community policing (Schafer, 2003). The success of community policing is heavily influenced by organisational factors, including the structure of the organisation within which officers work and the level of support and encouragement received from their colleagues and supervisors (Greene, 1998).

Many community policing programs clearly demarcate the role and work of community police officers and general duties police officers (Brereton, 2000; Edwards, 1999). The report on Project Benchmark found that many of the difficulties faced in attempting to encourage general duties officers to embrace community policing as an integral part of their role were further exacerbated by the continued emphasis on the distinction between the roles and activities of community policing and general duties officers (Saul, 1997). In both the evaluation of the Australian Capital Territory Country Towns initiative (Collins, 1994) and the Toowoomba Beat Policing Project (Criminal Justice Commission, 1995), it was noted that this separation of roles served to reinforce pervasive attitudes within policing organisations that community policing is not ‘real’ police work. Consequently, the

satisfaction, enthusiasm and commitment of community policing officers may be difficult to maintain over the long term, which directly affects the implementation and the ultimate success of any initiative (Sarre, 1997).

### *Definitional Clarity*

Community policing has become so much a catch-phrase in modern policing throughout the world, that hardly any policing organisation wants to be seen as not participating. Consequently, almost anything that is not a reactive strategy to deal with a particular issue has been claimed as a community policing initiative, which has blurred the meaning of community policing (Edwards, 1999: 76).

Community policing needs to be defined with clarity, as the definition has direct implications for the implementation and evaluation of initiatives. As Cordner (1998: 45) noted, without clearly articulating what 'it' is, it is difficult to say whether 'it' works.

Critically, a clear definition enables both the community and police to be informed about the parameters of this policing model. In the past community policing has been oversold as a panacea for crime problems to the police and to the community, resulting in a loss of support for the model when immediate results are anticipated but not forthcoming and unrealistically high expectations are not met (Goldstein, 1994).

### *Locating the 'community'*

The community is the foundation upon which community policing is built. However, sometimes it may be difficult to locate a cohesive community with strong infrastructures as communities exist in many different forms (Flynn, 1998). It is essential that policing organisations adopt a broad view of what constitutes a community and that the challenges in locating a 'community' are understood. The varied nature of community memberships must also be recognised such that officers seek out and engage with a broad range of community members, particularly in communities where there is limited community organisation or interaction.

### *Partnerships in practice*

Community participation is the cornerstone of community policing. Initiatives are developed based on the presumption that community members will be both willing and able to respond to a community policing initiative. Yet, evaluations of past initiatives have found that responses vary considerably- some groups may be fearful or unappreciative of an increased police presence, others simply may not have the resources to work with the police (Skogan et al, 1999; Rosenbaum et al, 1998). Such challenges in attempting to engage the wider community to support and participate in community policing have been identified in various US evaluations (Skogan, 1994; McElroy, 1998). Community policing officers must be prepared for an unenthusiastic initial response to an increased police presence, aware that participation and partnership will not automatically occur, and understand that time and effort must be invested to overcome these barriers (Walker et al, 1992).

### *Identifying community concerns*

Community policing requires collaboration with the community. A major issue for police organisations when implementing community policing is the presence of strong personalities and influential groups, who may dominate discussions and control the initiative's direction (Thurman et al 2001). This is a particularly pertinent issue when there is great variety in the problems identified by different community members. There is a concern that while community policing presents itself as an initiative for the whole community it ultimately serve the interests of a vocal minority. It is essential that policing organisations seek to address these issues to ensure community policing is implemented for the benefit of the whole community.

### *Evaluation*

Community policing initiatives tend to be implemented with little regard to past initiatives and often neglect to adopt a clear definition of 'success'. Many that are evaluated focus on traditional indicators such as crime statistics and clear-up rates despite the fact that less traditional objectives are driving the initiative. Community policing tends to lack a long-term focus and relatively few evaluations have been conducted that have produced strong scientific evaluations (Sherman & Eck, 2002). A central recommendation of community policing evaluations including the Community

Patrol Officer Program (CPOP) program that operated in New York and the Community Police Stations project that was implemented in Victoria, Canada was the need for rigorous evaluations that employ wide-ranging methodologies (McElroy, 1998; Walker et al, 1992). The lack of rigorous evaluations has limited the continued expansion of the knowledge-base and the ability to identify effective community policing strategies (Sarre, 1997; Sherman & Eck, 2002). Policing organisations must ensure that rigorous evaluation of community policing initiatives occurs prior to the development of future initiatives.

## **What is known**

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Although noting that the number of rigorous evaluations was limited, Sherman and Eck (2002) were able to reach a number of conclusions regarding community policing as a crime prevention tool, notably that:

- community policing with no clear crime-risk factor focus does not work;
- community policing emphasising community participation is promising<sup>2</sup>;
- community policing focused on improving police legitimacy is promising , and;
- focusing on improving police ‘style’ and ‘substance’ to make police practices more ‘legitimate’ in the eyes of the public may be one of the most effective long-term crime prevention strategies.

## **Future challenges**

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Despite the challenges and limitations identified, commitment to community policing has not dissipated rather it has flourished. Attempts to implement community policing to date have drawn attention to some key stumbling blocks that present challenges to policing organisations for the future development and implementation of community policing initiatives. Three central issues remain.

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<sup>2</sup> Note that ‘promising’ does not mean that it definitely works, rather that the evidence thus far merits further research based on encouraging initial results (Sherman & Eck, 2002).

### *Capacity Building: Community Partnerships*

Working in partnership with the community is the central tenet of community policing. However, research has demonstrated that working with the community is less straightforward in practice than many policing organisations anticipate. Future initiatives need to identify this and allocate substantive resources to enable officers to work closely with communities to engage a broad range of community groups and members. Officers require extensive training to counter community unwillingness to participate and to undertake consultation. Consultation with the public is a marked shift away from traditional policing practice and this is often difficult for officers to undertake, particularly in terms of relinquishing past responsibilities and control to other agencies or community groups (Sarre, 1997).

Achieving community partnerships, especially within disadvantaged communities that are afflicted the greatest by crime problems, demands changes within the organisation to encourage and enable police officers to adopt new policing practices and to enable greater engagement with the public. Communities are often not equipped with the expertise or resources to tackle many of the crime-related problems that are of concern to them and thus the police must work with the community to implement community-based strategies and to establish community-agency networks that will empower the community to act in the future (Cameron & Laycock, 2002).

### *Capacity Building: Community policing as an organisational strategy*

Adopting community policing as the organisational philosophy does not signal the abandonment of the traditional response-based, investigative police function. Rather, a balance must be struck between the competing demands of emergency calls and rapid response situations (which will not simply disappear with the introduction of community policing) and the increased focus on community-based, proactive policing. The maximum benefit may be best achieved through a combined approach (Edwards, 1999). As community policing did not develop in a vacuum, other policing strategies such as intelligence-led policing and problem-oriented policing have simultaneously emerged (see Ratcliffe, 2003; Prenzler & Sarre 2002). Community policing is a strategy that can operate successfully when implemented with other complementary strategies, for example in Queensland problem-oriented partnership policing brought

together community policing with problem oriented policing. Thus, with community policing as the central paradigm it is possible to implement initiatives and strategies that allow for the building of partnerships (with the flow on effects of increasing intelligence and a greater understanding of the community context) that, for example, in turn feeds into intelligence-led policing strategies (Ratcliffe, 2003).

### *Expanding the evidence-base*

Although the evidence-base has increased in the past decade, many questions remain unanswered. A strong evidence-base to support the wisdom of community policing rather than the hyperbole that currently surrounds it is fundamental to the continued advancement of community policing (Skogan 1994). Bayley (1999: 4) stressed that policing organisations must “develop the institutional capacity to understand what is going on in their environment as well as the impact of their own strategies, and to use this knowledge to provide a higher measure of safety and reassurance to the public”. In addition to guiding what is implemented, research will assist police organisations to justify their identified priorities and commitments when meeting the increasing demand for public accountability for state-funded bodies.

It is essential that the aims of initiatives are clearly articulated and that multiple research methods are utilised in order for future evaluations to contribute results indicative of the success and effectiveness of community policing to the expanding evidence-base (Thurman et al 2001). Evidence must be drawn from rigorous evaluations that rely on wide-ranging data. The need for new and varied methodological tools reflects the shift away from traditional indicators of police performance (such as crime statistics) to focus on gathering of data that allows greater access to information such as community attitudes and perceptions, officer’s duties and job satisfaction and levels of community safety and disorder. The wider move to long-term crime reduction (Ratcliffe, 2003) requires a longitudinal focus for evaluations, such that the broader impacts of initiatives are considered and evaluated in addition to the immediate, short-term impacts.

### *Future research*

As yet, the long-term crime reduction verdict on community policing is still out (Sherman and Eck, 2002). Other key, and thus far unanswered, questions remain including:

- are the benefits of one community gained at the expense of another community, due to displacement?
- is community policing an effective crime prevention strategy?
- does community policing achieve its intended effect including: increasing the flow of intelligence from citizens to the police, increasing public satisfaction with the police, reducing fear of crime, and improved problem-solving with the community to address crime and safety concerns? (Rosenbaum, 1998; Sherman & Eck, 2002)
- are community policing and crime reduction tactics, such as problem-oriented policing, compatible?

These important questions are currently knowledge gaps, and with the increasing demand for value-for-money from policing services, need to be addressed rapidly.

In summary, community policing currently exists in a myriad of forms. Is community policing here to stay? It would appear so. Does it work to reduce crime? As yet, that is unclear.

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