The Community, the Council and the Police: A Combination to Reduce Crime in Footscray

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The revitalisation of a police and community partnership in tackling crime and its associated problems has gathered momentum across Europe and North America in recent years. Australian Police Forces are also generally embracing the concept of community policing. This approach to crime reduction is certainly not new, as over 160 years ago the Metropolitan London Police provided the first model for modern urban community policing with the fundamental principle that ‘the police are the public and the public are the police’ (Canada 1990, p. 18). Widenand (1977, p. 66) observed that:

when the police officer who patrols a neighbourhood confers with residents on the crime problems in the area and they jointly develop solutions to those problems, there is an opportunity to develop respect and understanding. More importantly the probabilities of reducing crime are significantly enhanced.

Community participation can take many forms and it is the practical application of community policing in Footscray which will be discussed in this paper.

Crime Problems in Footscray

The City of Footscray is an industrial, western suburb of Melbourne, with a significantly high Asian population in 1991. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, there has been an upsurge in the incidence of reported and unreported violent crime in the Footscray area. There has also been an increase in the incidence of drug dealing and its associated problems. Reports of extortion and blackmail being committed on the Vietnamese business community was of
particular concern. Youths had been trying intimidation tactics to elicit money from Vietnamese shopkeepers and were usually demanding small sums of about five dollars.

There were three distinct gangs which frequented the Footscray Shopping Mall: an Asian; a Filipino; and a combined Australian/Greek/Yugoslavian gang. A frightening arsenal of weapons had been recovered from these gangs, who not only fought among themselves but threatened and robbed shoppers. Some gang members carried meat cleavers and the gangs were so well-organised that they could strike, then disappear before a report was even made (Dunn 1991).

**A Partnership Against Crime**

Growing concerns over the increase in crime rates and a perceived need to bridge the gap between people of non-English speaking backgrounds and the police prompted the Police Commander of the district, Chief Superintendent Brian Richie, to develop a strategic approach to the problem in partnership with the community and the Footscray City Council.

In June 1990, the Police Commander approached the Council with an initiative directed towards the combined police/community achievement of some basic goals in the Footscray area. Those basic goals were:

- develop links between the Footscray City Council, local police and community groups to resolve local police/community problems and improve the quality of life of members of the Footscray community;
- educate and inform members of the ethnic community in the Footscray area about the role of the police and the legal system in society;
- create a non-confrontationist environment in which ethnic people can communicate with police to resolve community problems; and
- identify organised criminal groups operating in the Footscray area who are committing blackmail on large sections of the business community.

The Police Commander dedicated a sergeant and three constables to the task of developing strong links with the Footscray City Council and local community groups in order to resolve policing and community problems. Two constables were selected, both from ethnic backgrounds—one Vietnamese and the other Filipino. This selection was a vitally important step towards breaking the language barrier between the police and the community. The Council responded immediately with strong support for the initiative and provided accommodation for the group in the central business district of Footscray. The council-owned three-room premises has become a 'shopfront' type of police station, where members of the ethnic community can approach police in a non-threatening environment.

Within a short time, the community indicated their commitment and support of the Footscray Council/Police Ethnic Unit (as it is now known)
through the donation of a Nissan Pulsar. Local Nissan dealers, the Vietnamese traders and several other large businesses in Footscray rallied together to raise the money to fund the purchase of the vehicle. The vehicle is now registered to the Footscray City Council and is donated to the Victoria Police. The police department has insured the vehicle and covers its maintenance and service. The car is equipped with a police UHF radio and magnetic signs identifying the vehicle as the Footscray Council/Police Ethnic Unit and detailing the major donors. The donation of the vehicle was a significant tribute towards the commitment the community was initially prepared to make. The community continued to resource this small, dedicated group of police by donating a laptop computer and printer on which to store the crime database.

Not long after the Footscray Council/Police Ethnic Unit commenced operations, it became evident that early police response to calls received was critical. The Footscray Market recognised this problem and donated a mobile telephone with a battery recharger. This allowed the Unit to be at the scene of a crime within minutes, instead of discovering—usually hours later—that they were in close proximity and unaware of the crime being committed.

The community has also donated a telephone answering machine, a polaroid camera and a photo album. This allocation of resources can be seen as a commitment of community faith in the Unit. It also provides the community and the Unit with a stronger sense of partnership in crime prevention and control.

**Coordinated support**

The activities of the Footscray Council/Police Ethnic Unit have been developed in line with the basic goals set by the district Police Commander in June 1990. The Unit—in developing links between the community, the council and the police to resolve policing problems and issues involving the ethnic community—has established an extensive network of contacts. Police from the Ethnic Unit regularly attend meetings with people in these networks and are also involved in several of the network committees. Some of the community support agencies in this network are: the Needle Exchange Program; the Cambodian, Lao and Vietnamese Young People Support Group; Footscray Recreation Centre; West Footscray Neighbourhood House; Footscray Shopping Centre Traders’ Association; Vietnamese Elderly Groups; Viet Association Youth Services Bureau; Footscray Workers with Town People; Western Youth Law Line; Footscray YMCA; and the Life Education Caravan. An important aspect of this networking is to ensure that no-one in the network is working at cross-purposes. Informal meetings with leaders of the business community are regularly held, usually at their place of business, and these meetings are designed to gauge the effectiveness of the Unit and obtain feedback.

The Unit now works closely with inspectors from the Footscray City Council Town Planning Section in relation to policing amusement parlours. A strategy has been developed to closely monitor the conduct of amusement parlours by ensuring that all amusement parlours in Footscray operate under uniform conditions. These stringent conditions provide police and town planning inspectors an opportunity to more effectively control the conduct of these premises.
Contact has been made with the Footscray Community Arts Centre and, as a result, the Centre will be providing young artists to paint a mural depicting police interacting with youth on the fence at the rear of the Arts Centre premises (the Footscray Council/Police Ethnic Unit is located adjacent to this building). Progress is also being made in the area of educating the ethnic community of the state disaster plan and evacuation procedures. In order to further break down the barriers existing between police and youth workers, regular meetings are held with Footscray youth and social workers. At these meetings, discussions take place concerning any problems experienced with the legal system or police. Feedback from this forum is relayed to the district Police Commander and the police training district.

Education and awareness
The second goal of the Footscray Council/Police Ethnic Unit—to educate and inform members of the Footscray ethnic community about the role of the police and the legal system—has been pursued with vigour. As an extension of the Police/Schools Involvement Program, the Unit has targeted students from Year 7 to Year 12 at secondary colleges in the Footscray area. The curriculum covers personal development, domestic violence, police in society, homeless youth, pre-drive education and the court system. Discussions are currently taking place with the curriculum committee of the Footscray TAFE College with a view to developing a police studies topic for the language classes.

One of the highlights of the Unit’s activities has been a three-day youth camp for seventy young Vietnamese people. The Footscray Council/Police Ethnic Unit, the Footscray City Council and the Cambodian, Lao and Vietnamese Young Peoples Support Group combined forces and secured government funding to conduct the three-day camp at the Derby Hill Blue Light Youth Camp, Maldon. The young people attending the camp participated in recreational and educational activities conducted by members of the Footscray City Council, the Police Ethnic Unit and the Cambodian, Laotian and Vietnamese Youth Support Group. The camp also addressed the issues of young people of non-English speaking backgrounds and their relationship with the law and aimed to encourage a better understanding of the types of services available and a confidence in their use. Due to the close proximity of the Footscray Council/Police Ethnic Unit to the community, the police members of the Unit have been able to provide some follow-up support to the young people after the camp.

A further strategy used to develop a better understanding of the police role, the services offered by police, and other issues of concerns to the ethnic community was the operation of a ‘phone-in day’. Operation HOP-TAC was conducted on 4 December 1990, with the use of interpreters, at the Crime Stoppers facilities. The operation was jointly run with the Victoria Police Asian Division and was targeted at the Vietnamese community. The operation was seen as a success as over fifty phone calls were received. Information was received by police relating to illegal activities, and police gave advice on traffic laws, domestic disputes and court procedure.
Less confrontation
The idea of using shopfront-type premises in the Footscray central business district for the Footscray Council/Police Ethnic Unit was to provide an environment which would encourage the local ethnic community to approach the police. Initially, police from the Unit distributed leaflets and calling cards to the business community of Footscray, advising them of the address, the role and the telephone number of the Unit. To date, most of the enquiries at the office have been from Vietnamese people, however it is hoped to encourage the attendance of members of the community from other ethnic backgrounds.

Encouragement is given to police and the Criminal Investigations Bureau from surrounding police stations to attend and utilise the resources of the Unit. The Vietnamese member of the Unit, Constable Nguyen, has assisted the local Criminal Investigations Bureau in interviewing rape victims, other witnesses and suspects. The Unit is very mindful of the importance of integration with other police services.

Organised crime
In order to identify organised criminal groups operating within the ethnic community in Footscray, the Unit has established a crime database of known criminal activity in the area. With the assistance of a crime analyst attached to the Unit and the computer donated by the community, an extensive crime database has been developed, which has been particularly helpful in identifying gangs and individual involvement.

The support developed with the ethnic community by this Unit has been the key to enable the occurrence of extensive intelligence gathering. The Unit and other local police have conducted small police operations in the Footscray area which have resulted in several offenders being charged with drug and theft related matters.

There has been a positive change in the level of response from the ethnic community in regard to information about crime. In particular, the Vietnamese community is now more prepared to tell police about criminal activity that is occurring, and some are prepared to help police as witnesses in relation to court proceedings. Bearing in mind that this Unit is only in its infancy, the achievements in this area are quite considerable.

Although the vast majority of the activities of the Unit are directed towards the prevention of crime, within six months of operation they had charged forty-three offenders with a total of 140 offences. These offences included: drug offences (34); unlawful possession (34); assault (15); theft (11); theft of motor cars (12); theft from motor cars (5); street offenders (12); criminal damage (1); warrants (8) and fisheries offences (18). This has been the direct result of concentrated foot patrols in the Footscray central business district by both uniformed and plain-clothed members of the Unit. This Unit provides a balanced approach to the combination of proactive and reactive functions of policing so that the expectations of the total community are met.
Benefits from the Initiatives

It has been envisaged that the establishment of the Footscray Council/Police Ethnic Unit would bring many benefits to both the community and the police. The activities of the Unit have enabled police to become part of the formal and informal networks which are established in the Footscray community. The police can be accepted as valuable members of the community and not merely as a discreet group with the sole perceived functions of law enforcement. It has enabled the police to become more aware of community programs operating in the Footscray area. The police now have a better medium from which feedback can be obtained on how they are perceived by the community. With the breaking of language and cultural barriers and the formation of trusting relationships, the prevention and detection of crime can be greatly enhanced.

The work of the Unit provides people from non-English speaking backgrounds with information on the role of the police, in both service and law-enforcement. The ethnic community can be kept informed of changes to the law and be provided with access to information on police programs such as Crime Stoppers and Neighbourhood Watch. The mere ability of the ethnic community to be able to have access to police without feeling threatened by a language barrier is a positive step toward crime prevention.

Performance Evaluation

An independent evaluation of the Footscray Council/Police Ethnic Unit has yet to be undertaken however, in April 1991, Constable Nguyen of the Unit conducted a survey with the intention of gaining community feedback. This survey was certainly not meant to be an extensive scientific evaluation of the Unit, but it was an enthusiastic attempt by members of the Unit to gauge the results.

The survey was conducted among the Vietnamese traders in Footscray. In all, seventy-seven questionnaires containing twelve questions relating to the operations of the Unit were distributed. Approximately 90 per cent of the responses to all questions were in the positive, which is quite extraordinary to say the least. Nevertheless, the survey results reinforced the view expressed in a letter received from Mr P. Black on behalf of the Footscray Shopping Centre Association Incorporated, dated 8 March 1991. The letter contained, inter alia, the following message:

The Unit has formed a close relationship with the traders in the Central Business District and has been particularly successful in forging these ties with the Asian Traders resulting in growing confidence and communication between the traders and the police.

The marked resultant decrease in crime, vandalism and bad behaviour (particularly in teenage groups congregating in the Mall) has been most encouraging; also the almost total elimination of graffiti (Black 1991, personal correspondence).
Conclusion
At this early stage of development, the Footscray Council/Police Ethnic Unit, would appear to have made considerable efforts towards achieving its initial goals. This Unit is merely one example of efforts to formalise community partnerships in the prevention and detection of crime. Past experience, both in Australia and overseas, demonstrates the willingness of the community to actively participate in such programs. The extent and type of commitment given by the community will largely depend on the community’s attitudes and expectations.

With the escalation of crime and its impact on finite police resources, it is incumbent on police managers to look to new directions in an effort to create an awareness within the community as to the role they play in reducing crime.

References


Dunn, B. 1991 (unpub.), Report to Public Inquiry held by Victorian Community Council Against Violence, Footscray, 18 February.