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International Summaries

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From Great Britain

Community Constables: A Study of a Policing Initiative

The community constable policing initiative will not be fully effective until underlying program problems are addressed.

By David Brown and Susan Iles

Introduction

Does assigning patrol officers to specific beats increase their contact with the public and improve police/community relationships? Answers to this question were the main goals of the community constable programs first introduced by British police in the mid-1970's and adopted more widely in the 1980's.

The programs were prompted by a serious deterioration of police-community relations by the mid-1970's. Many observers at the time viewed this deterioration as one of the most important problems facing police in recent years. Concerns centered specifically on police relations with youth and ethnic minorities. The removal of officers from foot patrol seemed to be the main reason for reduced communication between police and the public. Other contributing factors were the increased

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public demand for police services, and police officers' desires to specialize.

Community policing took two forms: specialists were assigned to deal with particular segments of the public, and generalists were assigned as community constables to patrol specific beats by either car or foot. These measures aimed to produce positive police-community relations by working with communities to control crime.

Past research on community policing had been limited, largely impressionistic, and anecdotal. Small samples and its focus on short-term rather than long-term effects resulted in criticism of the researchers. In addition, results of the limited research were inconclusive. This study aimed to rectify these shortcomings and to serve as a starting point for a broader research effort on community policing. It focused on the work of the community constables—the generalists who had received little specialized training in community relations. The study used a sample survey to examine two issues:

1. The tasks that community constables actually perform and the degree to which they have direct contact with the public.

2. The problems that currently exist in community constable work.

Study methods

The researchers gathered data from five police forces chosen to provide a balanced mixture of community characteristics and crime rates. The police forces of Devon and Cornwall served mainly rural areas with low crime rates. The other three forces served an urban and rural mixture: Lancashire's force served established industrial communities, a major resort, and a new town; the Essex force served areas ranging from outer London suburbs to seaside resorts and village communities; and West Yorkshire's force served an almost completely industrial area with the highest rate of recorded crime among the five areas in 1981.

Each of these forces had established community constable programs in which officers were assigned to specific beats for a year or more. They used a variety of terms to describe their programs: "home beat," "neighborhood beat," "suburban beat," "rural beat," "detached beat," and "structured patrol officer." However, all the programs had similar functions. The officers were supposed to become familiar

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with their beats and the people on them. They also were expected to perform their regular police duties.

Two sets of data were gathered. The first gave information on the daily activities of the community constables. A sample of 300 constables completed forms showing their activities during 2 weeks in November 1981. They recorded data every 15 minutes during the workday on activities in six categories:

1. *Community involvement*, which consisted of public contacts unrelated to law enforcement. Included were informal street conversations with citizens, activities with youth clubs, and liaison efforts with other agencies.
2. *Preventive policing*, which consisted of routine patrol work, usually by foot, oriented to law enforcement, and included checking the security of property. Giving advice on crime prevention was the only verbal contact with the public that preventive policing involved.
3. *Crime work*, which included investigation, detection, and arrests related to particular crime reports.
4. *Public order work*, which was the handling of potential or actual disturbances at sports events or in other situations.
5. *General duties*, which pertained to report writing, court appearances, and administrative work that was related to the beat but not performed on the beat.
6. *Time withdrawn from the beat*, which consisted of activities that were completely unrelated to the constable's own beat. These activities included staffing vehicles and providing prison escorts.

The second data set came from interviews with 200 of the 300 officers from the activity survey and with senior officers in each of the five police forces. The constables responded to factual questions about their careers and their beats. They also were asked about their attitudes toward their work and the constraints

associated with it. The senior officers gave background information on the introduction of community constables in their forces, on the way they organized community constable work, and on their perceptions of problem areas in community constable work.

How police forces organized community constable programs

Community constable programs differed from other forms of policing in terms of personnel characteristics, deployment, supervision, and shift working arrangements. These differences resulted partly from the operational freedom given community constables and also from the expectation that they would take the initiative in deciding on the tactics most appropriate for their beats. In addition, the wide variety of needs and characteristics of the beats served meant that no single "textbook" approach could be used for community policing.

Personnel

A higher proportion of community constables was male (92 percent) than was the rest of the police population (87 percent). The community constables in the sample had an average age of 32.7 years, compared to 30.5 years for all officers.

Deployment

The uses of community constables varied. Two police forces used them only in areas with particular police-community problems. These were generally inner-city areas with immigrant populations, or large, modern housing developments lacking an established sense of community. One force used the constables in a new town where problems resulted from the town's geographical layout and from a community group that opposed the police. In contrast, the other two forces used community constables on nearly all their residential beats. These differing approaches reflected the view that community policing is a valuable way to improve and maintain relations between

the police and the public in all types of communities.

Beat sizes ranged from an average of 1 square mile in a city to 80 square miles in a rural area. Sometimes two constables shared one beat, but more often each constable had a separate beat, which he patrolled either by car or foot. For the larger beats, some units used team assignments, with teams of three to six members. However, teams were usually concentrated in areas with specific needs, such as one with an outbreak of burglaries. Backup support for these community constables usually came from mobile patrols and from regular foot patrol officers who helped during busy periods.

Supervision

Community sergeants or inspectors supervised the teams of community constables and also constables in areas with sufficient officers to warrant a sergeant or inspector. Shift supervisors for the conventional police officers also supervised other community constables.

The degree of supervision varied. For some areas it was nominal. In other areas, it was extensive. In addition, supervisors could call on community constables to handle duties unrelated to their own beats when manpower was short. Community constables also were accountable to centrally based departments of the forces that were responsible for improving police-community relations.

Shifts

Unlike other police, community constables could generally schedule their working hours as they wanted, the goal being to match work schedules with individual community needs. However, community constables usually chose daytime hours. They usually worked evening hours only if required to, if they operated on teams, or if shift supervisors required work according to a preplanned roster. These arrangements resulted from considerations other than the needs of community policing, however, and any benefits in terms of increased police/community contact were incidental.

The work of community constables

The analysis showed that the constables spent less than 14 percent of their duty time on community involvement work. The combination of general duties (such as report writing) and time withdrawn from the beat took more than one-half of each day. Preventive policing occupied the largest part of the time on the beat and took 22 percent of the officers' total time. However, preventive policing as defined in this study involved little or no verbal contact with citizens. Work related to crimes and to public order duties required less than 11 percent of the day.

Community involvement work

Of the 5.1 hours that the constables spent on community involvement in the average week, 3 hours consisted of informal contacts with citizens. The constables' formal involvement with clubs and community groups was superficial, except for involvement in youth clubs. The involvement would best be described as maintaining a police presence. Fewer than 20 percent of the officers were involved with activities of ethnic minority groups.

The types of activities in which constables were involved varied widely. In Lancashire, for example, constables averaged less than 1 hour per week in formal community involvement, in part because of their use in "difficult" areas with fewer community facilities and activities. The use of teams also reduced community involvement. Some forces concentrated on school liaison work. Others placed more emphasis on involvement in clubs and community groups. Community affairs departments and central branches with specific responsibilities both had strong influences on the types of activities in which community constables became involved.

Time withdrawn from the beat

On the average, the constables spent 7.7 hours per week on activities completely unrelated to their beats, such as prison escort or station duty. This amount of

activity away from their beats was in direct conflict with official policy and stated commitments to keep constables on their own beats.

General duties

General duties absorbed almost one-third of community constables' working hours. Although these duties were linked to work on the beat, they kept constables away from the public. These results match other research findings on police work, which are that police spend a large proportion of their time on administrative duties.

Preventive policing

The constables spent about one-fourth of their duty time on preventive policing, mainly foot patrol work, during which they did not talk much with the public. However, research in the United States has shown that foot patrol has the beneficial effect of making people feel more secure. Community constables will, therefore, need to spend sufficient time talking to citizens about measures to prevent crime.

Crime work

One-tenth of the constables' time was spent on crime incidents, inquiries, and surveillance. Most of the crimes were trivial, however, and a lot of this crime work consisted of followup inquiries and investigations for other police forces. Thus, these activities diverted constables from involving themselves in the community.

Public order work

Almost no time was spent on public order work, largely because regular patrol cars handled this task, or the community constables were not on duty at needed times. The public order work that community constables performed usually took place on other beats or in other jurisdictions. It related either to the riots earlier in 1981 or to crowd control at soccer games.

Barriers to police involvement in the community

The low fraction of time spent in the community and the types of tasks the community constables performed seemed contrary to the goals of the community constable program. However, obstacles existed to greater police-community involvement, among them: (1) duties away from the beat; (2) patterns of duty shifts; (3) relationships between community constables and other officers; and (4) career prospects for community constables.

Duties away from the beat

The most important constraint on community policing was the amount of time the constables spent on activities totally unrelated to their own communities. Three-fifths of the constables interviewed felt that these activities adversely affected their work. Assigning these duties to community constables represented interference in community policing by police managers.

Withdrawing constables from duties on their own beats to perform other duties was symptomatic of the low value placed by other officers on community policing. Confirming this, almost 80 percent of the community constables reported feeling that the police service had a low regard for their work. Community constables were among the first officers to be withdrawn from their beats when personnel shortages occurred. Withdrawals were less of a problem in rural areas, probably because constables were less readily available due to the distances they would have to travel. Thus, withdrawal from the beat was not a universal problem.

The time that community constables spent on general duties varied among police forces. Some of the variation resulted from differing crime rates. Management procedures also affected the time, however. In Lancashire, for example, efficient paperwork procedures enable the community constables to spend less time on report writing than their counterparts elsewhere.

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Patterns of duty shifts

Inadequate planning of shifts was a further barrier to the community constables' involvement in the community. Working mainly in the daytime restricted contact with people at organizational meetings and other activities that took place in the evenings. In addition, crime tended to increase during the evening, reaching a peak between 10:00 p.m. and midnight. Thus, the constables' usual working hours between 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. restricted both contact with certain sections of the community and involvement in many activities.

Relationships with other officers

A lack of contact between community constables and other officers presented a problem in all the police forces. In particular, many constables reported little or no contact with mobile patrols or the criminal investigation division. Constables also felt that detectives did not recognize community constables as valuable sources of information and the detectives were unwilling to make the initial approach to elicit information from constables.

Career prospects

Constables felt that community policing offered poor career opportunities. Although they liked their work, many believed that they would have to leave it to be promoted. As a result, they set time limits for staying in community policing. The consequence was frequent breaks in the continuity of policing on particular beats, thus undermining the goals of the program.

Conclusions

The main problems in community policing are:

1. Lack of planning of duty hours to match local patterns of crime or community activities.
2. Little time spent on activities that would benefit police-community relations.

3. Occasional physical presence rather than substantive involvement of the police in community organizations and agencies.

4. Excessive time spent off the beat in duties both related and unrelated to beat work.

5. Little verbal communication with the public during most of the time on the beat.

6. Inadequate contact with other police officers.

7. Turnover in community policing due to poor career prospects.

Clearly, community constable programs need changes. However, reforms will not be fully effective unless the underlying problems are addressed.

The basic problem is lack of organizational support. Senior levels of the police service strongly support community policing, but lower levels lack adequate organizational backing for the program. The authors suggest that providing this backing is essential to program success. Specific organizational changes might include:

- Stricter directives regarding the use of community constables.
- Use of community sergeants and inspectors as supervisors of all community constables to ensure compliance with directives.
- More clerical help.
- Streamlined paper flow.
- Systematic planning of shifts.
- Dissemination of information on the goals of community policing to all police officers.
- Efforts to bring community constables and other officers together in meetings and periodic work activities.
- Improved career prospects by making community policing a positive factor in promotions.

In addition, the authors point to the need for organizational changes. Specifically, they suggest that the police service needs to ensure that community constables have

the skills necessary for their jobs. They feel that the present view that common sense is the only requirement must change. Current training efforts are minimal; the authors feel they need close examination and many changes. They also suggest that training needs to be expanded and improved in several areas, and could focus on:

1. Information and skills needed for positive relations with ethnic minority groups.
2. Effective communication skills.
3. Skills for working with school groups.
4. Understanding functions of the probation, social, education, and welfare services with which the police work to reduce school truancy.

These changes will not come about easily. Attitudes toward community policing and current practice may be entrenched. However, the report states that the only way for the police service to demonstrate its commitment to community policing is to recognize that from the outset it failed to consider the full implications of the program. It is time to put community policing back on course.

Recent developments

Since the completion of this study, and prior to publication of the report, many police forces have changed their community constable programs to resolve some of the problems described here. Changes have included providing training, identifying more precise objectives, and modifying management and supervision to allow police officers to spend more time in the community.

The goal of this report is to promote good community constable service, because constructive relationships between the police and the community are central to good policing.