



# research into practice brief

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## Guidance points to assist police in improving collaboration and partnership-building for more effective cannabis enforcement

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### Introduction

Research indicates that traditional policing approaches, such as reactive policing interventions including arrests and seizures, are of only limited effectiveness in addressing drug and drug-related crime over the longer term, particularly when used in the absence of other more proactive police responses (Brogden & Nijhar 2005). Policing approaches that promote quality community input in solving local crime and disorder problems have been found to be very effective methods for preventing or minimising drug and drug-related crime in Australia and elsewhere (Brogden & Nijhar 2005; Mazerolle et al 2007) and there is ongoing policy support among Australian police agencies for this approach (Putt 2010).

Collaboration and partnership-building are two practices central to community policing, which is a policing philosophy that emphasises police partnerships with non-police agencies and groups who can assist police to develop appropriate responses to local crime and other problems. Community policing has been around in different forms for a long time in Australia, although it appears to be undergoing some resurgence. Given that cannabis supply, production and use often take place at a local or retail level (Delahunty & Putt 2006; Nicholas 2008), a community policing model is particularly suitable for addressing cannabis markets, both in metropolitan and non-metropolitan settings.

Effective collaboration and partnership-building have the potential to enhance relationships between police and the community, deepen understanding of cross-cultural complexities, and increase the flow of intelligence and the visibility of crime (Delahunty & Putt 2006). Other benefits include a greater likelihood of community members complying with the law (Sivasubramaniam & Goodman-Delahunty 2008) and developing more effective solutions to tackle community problems (Myhill 2009).

In this Research into Practice Brief a description is provided of how community policing principles may be used by police to improve collaboration and partnership-building in an attempt to more effectively address the drug law enforcement challenges presented by Australia's diverse cannabis markets. A one-size-fits-all practice is not advocated. Rather it is suggested that police attitudes and the manner in which communities are approached and engaged can have a major influence on improving drug law enforcement outcomes.

### 1. Prioritise cannabis

It is important that police and collaborative agencies recognise the harms cannabis can have on users and the broader community. Although cannabis is frequently described as a 'soft' and relatively harmless drug (Hall 2009), its supply and use can result in



considerable individual and community-level harms. Individual effects include (for instance) depression, anxiety, psychosis, and fertility problems (Directions Act 2010). Community impacts can include local crime and disorder problems, major financial losses (with money being spent on cannabis that would otherwise be available in the community for productive purposes) and increased social dissolution (McAtamney & Willis 2010). Given these significant impacts, cannabis should be accorded priority at least equal to that of other illicit drugs.

## 2. Prioritise a community-centred philosophy

Of relevance to rural, regional and metropolitan settings alike, prioritising a community-centred philosophy is fundamental to effective collaboration and partnership-building. Under such an approach the community and police are perceived as a collective entity that can effectively address crime. Ideologies central to a community-centred philosophy include, but are not limited to:

- incorporating community policing strategies into daily practice; viewing it as core work (Myhill 2006 & 2009);
- affecting changes within the community through strong relationships with police (Delahunty & Putt 2006, Community Relations Commission for multicultural NSW 2006; Scott & Jobes 2007); and
- viewing community and police as equal partners (Scott & Jobes 2007).

Addressing police culture is essential to implementing a community-centred philosophy (Myhill 2009). Traditionally, to solve crime problems police have appeared to operate in a manner that appears largely independent from the community and there has been a reluctance to share crime information with third parties. In some cases this is because community participation has been viewed by police as detracting from their sense of authority or their position as crime prevention ‘experts’ (Willis 2010). A move towards a community-centred philosophy requires organisational commitment, from executive management through to operational levels (Wood & Bradley 2009; Myhill 2009).

Activities that may foster cultural change within police agencies can include:

- providing opportunities for formal and informal assessment of prior and current practices (Wood & Bradley 2009);
- providing appropriate training for both new recruits and existing police on the value and importance of community policing (Myhill 2009); and
- maintaining or implementing appropriate structures that reward performance (Myhill 2006).

## 3. Adopt a partnership philosophy

For partnership and collaboration to be effective, police need to develop approaches that reflect the needs of the targeted group. For example, a study into an African humanitarian settlement in New South Wales found that traditional African experience of people in uniform tended to be that of a torturer or persecutor (CRC 2006). High levels of fear and distrust towards police existed among that community, partly due to feelings of being targeted by police because ‘they were black’, language barriers and lacking an awareness of Australian law and justice (CRC 2006).

Initiatives that may improve such relationships can involve:

- organising social activities and community events such as barbeques that may help overcome negative perceptions of police (CRC 2006);
- approaching the community out-of-uniform during initial contact;

- employing liaison officers and African police personnel to diversify police and bridge gaps, for example language barriers (Ben-Porat 2008);
- providing culturally-sensitive training for police (CRC 2006);
- establishing a service within the community (for example, holding information sessions for community members). That is, being seen as contributing and participating in the community rather than simply policing or enforcing the law (Scott & Jobes 2007).

#### 4. Recognise the need for time

While these initiatives may be effective ways to partner with diverse communities, building trust and gaining community confidence is often a slow and gradual process that can take months, if not years (Scott & Jobes 2007; Delahunty & Putt 2006). Problems can also arise when communities are unwilling to participate or are reluctant to communicate with police (Myhill 2009; Scott & Jobes 2007). In addition to a strong commitment by police, developing partnerships with community must be viewed as a long-term crime control strategy (Delahunty & Putt 2006).

It is important that police are aware of:

- the history of poor relations (Myhill 2006 & 2009; Scott & Jobes 2007);
- social influences, for example, racist attitudes (Scott & Jobes 2007);
- the need to be flexible. The prevailing culture of each community needs to be assessed and considered in context;
- under-policing/over-policing of certain ethnic groups, as this has the potential to lead to mutual distrust between community and police (Ben-Porat 2008).

#### 5. Evidence-based collaboration

The principles of problem-oriented policing can guide collaborations designed to enhance cannabis enforcement and avoid inefficient use of resources (Brogden & Nijhar 2005). Problem-oriented policing involves identifying and tackling the causes of problems that lead to crime rather than simply reacting to crime as it occurs (Brogden & Nijhar 2005). For example, evidence shows that people commonly use cannabis for the first time in their mid-late teenage years and that people perceive the risks of cannabis to be low and socially acceptable (Copeland et al 2006). As such, a proactive approach that police may choose to take is to collaborate with schools to establish programs tailored at intervening early to address such issues (for instance, educating teenagers about the harms associated with cannabis use).

Questions police need to consider before establishing partnerships or collaborating with stakeholders may include:

- What are the primary risk factors or most important contextual issues associated with cannabis use (for example, unemployment, boredom, age, peers)?
- What are the current best-practice interventions (for example, psychological, pharmacological)? Note: best-practice interventions view cannabis primarily as a medical or health issue rather than one of simple criminality (see Copeland et al 2006 for current best-practice treatments).
- What services provide support, treatment and education (for example hospitals, schools)?
- Who are the most influential stakeholders (for example, media, peers)?
- Who or what may be contributing to the problem (for example, parents, unemployment)?
- Who are indirectly affected by cannabis (for example, friends, family, employers)?

While collaboration and partnership-building with communities can produce successful results, in some instances police have been found to feel torn between their role as a law enforcer and as a community member, particularly in small regional or rural communities (Scott & Jobes 2007). For example, tensions between community attitudes, the use of police discretionary powers and a desire to uphold the law may arise for police at local festivals, where there is frequent heavy drinking and residents want to have ‘a good time’ (Jobes 2003). In such cases, it is possible for local police to engage with police from other jurisdictions to assist in crime prevention activities if there is a need to address any expected and problematic anti-social behaviour (Scott & Jobes 2007). To be objective and effective, police need to be aware of conflicting interests and maintain a balance between their roles as law enforcers and as community members.

## Summary

Several principles have been described that may assist police in improving collaboration and partnership-building, and that have particular relevance for addressing local Australian cannabis markets. In particular, consideration has been given to describing how a community policing philosophy can be effective at addressing cannabis problems, especially where traditional policing approaches have fallen short. The principles include:

- prioritising cannabis as a community and crime problem;
- allowing a philosophy of community engagement to underscore practice;
- recognising the need to adopt new and creative ways to partner with communities that reflect their diverse needs and desires;
- allowing for time to form and effectively implement partnerships; and using evidence to guide and prioritise partnerships and collaboration.

While reactive responses remain an important component of cannabis enforcement, proactive initiatives based on the principles outlined in this paper may contribute to more effective and efficient cannabis enforcement.

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