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Managing community perceptions of drug problems, crime and policing

Katie Willis

Introduction

The Australian public's perception that illegal drugs are a problem in their neighbourhood has varied over time, with 57 per cent, 59 per cent and 52 per cent of them believing it to be the case in 2006-07, 2007-08 and 2008-09, respectively (SCRGSP 2010). Public perceptions of trends in crime do not often align with actual crime trends. For example, despite a decreasing trend in the aggregate crime rate over the past 10 years in Australia, the majority of the public continues to perceive that crime is increasing. The media, family attitudes, limited education and old age are significant influencing factors in relation to people's misperceptions of the crime rate (Davis & Dossetor 2010).

Communities that believe crime is rife have typically less confidence in the criminal justice system than those who do not hold this view, which is an attitude that police and other criminal justice practitioners and policy-makers should find concerning (Weatherburn & Indermaur 2004). At best, loss of confidence in the criminal justice system can lead to irrational fears about personal safety and well-being, which may impact on lifestyle choices. At worst, loss of public confidence in the criminal justice system can lead to a range of highly undesirable behaviour and problems, including (for instance) vigilantism and civil disorder.

Successfully managing community perceptions of the fear of crime and policing effectiveness is challenging. While many of the things that drive public perceptions of crime are outside direct police control (as noted above, the media, family attitudes and so on), there are things that police and others can do to influence them. For example, it is important that accurate data about crime are published and disseminated to the public. The police, local government, statistical and crime research agencies form important conduits through which accurate crime data and information can be published and disseminated. It is also critical that police engage and work with the community, particularly those parts of the community that are more likely to hold misperceptions. It is through active community engagement that police are able to gain a comprehensive understanding of local crime problems and concerns so that they can tailor appropriate responses to local circumstances.

While community policing has been around in different guises for many years in Australia, it appears to be undergoing a resurgence. For instance, New South Wales Police recently commenced a change management program, the Customer Service Program, with the aim (among other things) of improving service delivery to increase satisfaction with the police, reduce customer service complaints, enhance interactions with the community,

improve perceptions of police, and improve victim response (Burn 2010). In 2009, the Australian Federal Police announced that it had partnered with a range of agencies and the Australian Vietnamese community to develop new ways of addressing domestic drug markets (AFP 2009). The Queensland Police Service has partnered with an academic institution and several peak bodies of remote Indigenous communities (including elected local government members) in an attempt to reduce cannabis-related harms in Cape York and the Torres Strait in Far North Queensland (Robertson & Dowie 2008). These are just some of a number of recent community policing approaches that have been implemented in recent times in Australia.

This brief outlines what community policing is, some of the benefits and challenges of community policing, and how community policing approaches can assist police to manage public perceptions of local drug problems, other crime and policing. It does not advocate that the police force should police on the basis of public perception, rather it suggests that the use of community policing approaches can complement other police efforts to effectively address crime and safety issues, including public perception problems. While this brief is written within the context of addressing public perceptions of cannabis and other drug markets, findings outlined in this brief have broader application than this.

What is community policing?

Community policing has proved difficult to define, mostly because there is debate about whether it represents a policing philosophy or merely a grab bag of tactical interventions and activities. Irrespective of what constitutes community policing, its core purpose relates to increasing police legitimacy and community satisfaction in neighbourhoods that have lost confidence in police (Ratcliffe 2008). Activities commonly associated with community policing include drug action teams, schools programs, Neighbourhood Watch schemes, and high visibility foot patrols (to name a few). Community policing approaches emphasise problem-solving, as well as partnering with non-police agencies and groups to develop appropriate responses to crime and disorder problems. It involves continuous and sustained community involvement that is designed to develop long-term solutions to local problems. It may also address community issues that are not necessarily directly about drug problems, crime and disorder.

What community policing is not

Community policing is **not** a police sales pitch or cynical exercise in public relations. As noted above, it focuses on police working with communities to collectively identify and solve local problems. When viewed in this way it can be seen to relate closely to 'public diplomacy', a concept that is most often used in the context of foreign policy development. Public diplomacy centres on the ways in which a country or agency communicates with citizens in other countries. Its premise is that genuine dialogue is central to achieving the goals of foreign policy. As such, it is a two-way street in which foreign policy is shaped by identifying a problem/issue through listening and conversing with citizens within specific communities, analysing the problem/issue, and then addressing that problem/issue through appropriate policy development (Cull 2009).

The benefits and challenges of community policing

Some of the key goals and intended benefits of community policing have already been outlined, such as improving perceptions of safety and police effectiveness, and decreasing fear of crime. When done well, other benefits of community policing include improving police-community relationships, increasing community capacity to deal with issues, as well as reducing crime, disorder and anti-social behaviour (Coquilhat 2008).

However, community policing also has its challenges. In relation to police agencies, community policing represents a shift from what are considered traditional policing approaches, in which police work independently from the community to identify and solve crimes and where information-sharing is not often encouraged. Under this model of policing, officers can resent civilian influence on operational priorities and decision-making as it is seen as detracting from police's sense of autonomy and authority. Furthermore, some police view community policing as 'soft' or not doing 'real' police work because it does not centre on investigating and arresting people (Coquilhat 2008). It is also sometimes the case that police simply lack the necessary skills and expertise to problem-solve and effectively engage with the community (Roche et al 2009).

For community policing to be effective, police who advocate the approach need to find ways to build support internally to overcome cultural resistance. Some of the ways that this can be achieved include:

- sound leadership (at executive and middle management levels) that supports and encourages police to adopt community policing approaches;
- involvement by police management in the design, implementation and review of community policing approaches;
- disseminating better practice guidance on community policing to staff that also includes examples of community policing that worked well and explains why it worked well; and
- building police capability in problem-solving and community relations (particularly the value of the contribution of communities).

'What works' in managing community perceptions of crime and policing?

An international review of evaluations (including Australian evaluations) of policing strategies that are designed to improve public perceptions of safety and police effectiveness has identified the elements of community policing that are most effective or promising (Dalgleish & Myhill 2004). The review findings indicate that there is considerable overlap and linkage between the strategies that are effective or promising in addressing perceptions of public safety and those that are effective or promising in addressing perceptions of police effectiveness. In terms of improving public perceptions of safety, the strategies found to be most effective or promising included:

- patrol-based interventions;
- improving visibility, accessibility and familiarity;
- co-ordinated community policing (use of multiple community policing interventions in one strategy); and
- improving residential security.

The strategies found to be most effective or promising in relation to improving perceptions about police effectiveness included:

- patrol-based interventions;
- improving police visibility and familiarity;
- co-ordinated community policing;
- community engagement; and
- beat policing.

The remainder of this brief will outline important considerations underlying these strategies.

Patrol-based interventions

Patrol-based interventions relate to a perceived need for a return to high-visibility beat policing and need for greater familiarity and contact with local police. Public perceptions of both police effectiveness and feelings of personal safety decrease when patrol-based interventions are reduced or dropped. Some of the most effective patrol-based interventions outlined in Dalgleish and Myhill's review included:

- citizen contact patrols and foot patrols – patrol work designed to increase familiarity between officers and community members, but also to provide citizens with information about local crime and provide an opportunity to receive feedback from citizens about neighbourhood problems;
- police community stations – small stations or 'shopfronts' designed to bridge the gap between the police and the community, thereby increasing accessibility;
- police-community newsletters – regular newsletters developed to disseminate information about meetings, crime prevention and security advice, and accurate local crime data and information; and
- beat policing – incorporating visible patrols and community engagement to help identify and solve local problems.

Improving visibility, accessibility and familiarity

These concepts relate to a number of the patrol-based interventions outlined above, particularly the citizen contact patrols and police community stations. An additional intervention found to be effective in improving public perceptions of police visibility, accessibility and familiarity included 'co-ordinated community policing', which is essentially a combination of different intervention methods, including those outlined above. Dalgleish and Myhill found it difficult to determine which particular methods were more successful than others in the co-ordinated community policing approach as evaluations of this approach involved evaluation of the whole intervention, rather than its separate elements.

Co-ordinated community policing

As already noted, co-ordinated community policing is designed to reduce crime and improve public perceptions of police effectiveness and community safety through use of multiple interventions. In the evaluations, common components of co-ordinated community policing included patrol-based interventions, police community stations, and police-community newsletters. Other elements included targeting specific communities and enlisting representatives from those communities to help identify local problems and contribute towards solutions to those problems, and getting the community to assist in reducing the signs of local crime.

Residential security

Residential security issues were exclusively dealt with in evaluations from the United Kingdom. This approach differs from the other approaches in that it does not involve direct operational policing, but rather police-initiated improvements in security to reduce the incidence of crime in areas that have high crime rates, and to improve fear of crime in the community. One evaluation that produced successful (short-term) improvements in community perceptions involved police funding the fitting of security devices for all ground floor points of entry in residences in areas that had high burglary rates. Fear of crime and fear of burglary dropped in the experimental area but rose in the comparison area. The evaluator indicated that the rise in the comparison area was not due to burglary displacement as the number of burglaries in the experimental area did not change appreciably following the police intervention. Rather, the evaluator suggested that the

improvement in public perception in the experimental area may have been driven by the initial positive signal that police sent out because they were seen to be 'doing something' in an area that had an intractable burglary problem (Allatt 1984).

Community engagement

Community engagement is fundamental to community policing and proved to be an important and effective strategy in improving public perceptions of police effectiveness and personal safety in Dalgleish and Myhill's review. Community engagement, which can involve any number of strategies, was found to be most effective where the community was consulted with, and included in, problem-solving and the identification of solutions.

Beat policing

Beat policing in this brief refers to a Queensland Police Service strategy in which officers concentrate on a small beat area and are residents of these beat areas, with a mini police station located at their residence (frequently in their garage) as a point of contact for local citizens. Officers are required to patrol their beats on foot wherever possible, using local knowledge to proactively address underlying problems. As such, it incorporates visible patrols and community engagement to help identify and solve local problems. It was initially trialled in Toowoomba in the early to mid-1990s, but was later rolled out to other regional and metropolitan centres in Queensland. Currently there are 114 police beats operating in Queensland (Queensland Police Service 2010).

Community policing in rural and remote locations

While many of the strategies outlined in this paper are designed for metropolitan settings, communities in rural and remote locations have adopted their own community policing approaches because of real or perceived gaps in service. For instance, several remote Indigenous communities employ community police officers to assist in maintaining public order through enforcement of local council by-laws that mirror areas of criminal law (such as in dealing with property offences, offences against the person, public nuisance and good order offences). These community police are employees of the local councils and not the jurisdictional police service (Crime and Misconduct Commission 2009). Other community policing approaches that have been used in rural and remote locations include (for example):

- police liaison officers – to build rapport and enhanced communication between the police and local community, as well as to facilitate joint solutions to local crime and disorder problems;
- regular formal consultations with community leaders and others to discuss issues of concern; and
- positive informal interaction, such as through local sports, recreational and social events (Delahunty & Putt 2006).

Summary

Community policing approaches are re-emerging in Australia and elsewhere as they have been found to be an effective means for not only addressing crime and anti-social behaviour, but in managing public perceptions of crime and police effectiveness. Strategies that include multiple interventions, such as those outlined in this brief, are particularly promising. However, implementing community approaches necessitates weighing up the relative costs and potential benefits of the interventions as some are more resource and time-intensive than others. Consideration of internal police culture facilitating or inhibiting effectiveness of such approaches must also be made.

Most of the evaluated interventions reviewed by Dalgleish and Myhill relate to interventions implemented in metropolitan settings (the exception being beat policing, which was initially implemented within regional Queensland) and so there are questions about the transferability of some of the interventions to regional and/or rural locations. For instance, it is unlikely that foot patrols, designed to improve public perceptions of police visibility and accessibility, would be appropriate within a rural setting. However, the recent research literature points to community policing approaches that have particular application within rural and remote Australian locations. In short, there is no 'one size fits all' in relation to community policing. Environment and contextual matters are important and need to be factored into community policing implementation plans.

Finally, it is important that police consider identifying relevant baseline measures in their implementation plans as these will assist in evaluating the success (or otherwise) of the interventions at some later date, and will assist to justify whether an intervention should or should not continue.

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