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Community policing as a police strategy: effects and future outlook

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Community policing as a police strategy: effects and future outlook

Abstract

COP as a police strategy has been widely discussed and commented, both in theory and in practice. Police research has indeed devoted a considerable amount of time in discussing the roots of this police strategy and in contemplating its effects. In this article, we aim to give the reader an overview of these discussions, focusing on the research into the effects of COP. After an introduction on COP as a police strategy and its backgrounds, we look at studies that have reviewed the impacts of this strategy on a number of levels: the impact on crime, on public opinion and on incivilities and fear of crime. These studies show that the research focus remains very narrow, looking at specific types of interventions, but often without taking the broader context into account. We conclude by referring to a number of positive results of community oriented policing and plead for more and specifically more long-term research into effects of police strategies and tactics.

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1. Introduction – the deficit of traditional policing

The academic evaluative literature on police during the 70s and 80s concluded in an impressive consensus concerning the deficit of traditional police models (Bailey, 1994; Bailey, 1998). Summarized, following critiques can be considered as the most important: (1) The mere increase of the number of police officers is not an effective strategy to tackle crime or disorderly behaviour. The quantitative assumption cannot resolve the necessary qualitative change of 'how to do good policing' (Greene, 1998); (2) The police cannot prevent crime, and more generally, cannot function without the help of the population, which means that the population is much more than 'the eyes and ears' of the police (Rosenbaum, 1998); (3) The classic tactics of traditional police models are too reactive, while they do not affect the circumstances that cause crime and disorder; (4) Police policy is frequently too broad and is applied to different problems in one and the same way ('one size fits all' – Skogan, 1998). Observers advocated the need of 'tailor-made responses'. The need for linking different forms of policing to specific risks is probably the most energetic conclusion of police research during these decades.

2. COP as a police strategy

The most important attempt to the transformation and reform of policing during last decades was without any doubt the introduction of "Community (Oriented) Policing" (COP). The combination of focus on COP studies and the absence of ethnographers during the 90-ies had as a consequence that the most influential books were studies on COP (Skogan & Harnett, 1996), while this focus continued in the early years of this century (Skogan, 2006). Without any doubt, this had a powerful and lasting effect on the image and the rhetorical capacity of the police (Manning & Yursza Warfield, 2009).

Despite this evolution, Eck and Rosenbaum observe: *'There is no simple or commonly shared definition of community policing, either in theory or in practice'* (Eck & Rosenbaum, 1994). Writing this, both authors suggest that COP over time became a container-notion. Bayley, who did a lot of research in different countries where COP was implemented, confirms this: *"Despite the benefits claimed for community policing, programmatic implementation of it has been very uneven. Although widely, almost universally, said to be important, it means different things to different people (...) Community policing on the ground often seems less a program than a set of aspirations wrapped in a slogan"* (Bayley, 1988).



M. Moore states in this context (Moore, 1994): *"Community policing is not a clear-cut concept, for it involves reforming decision-making processes and creating new cultures within police departments rather than being a specific tactical plan (...). He further states: "Under the rubric of COP, American departments are opening small neighborhood substations, conducting surveys to identify local problems, organizing meetings and crime prevention seminars, publishing newsletters, helping form neighborhood watch groups, establishing advisory panels to inform police commanders, organizing youth activities, conducting drug education projects and media campaigns, patrolling on horses and bicycles, and working with municipal agencies to enforce health and safety regulations".*

Bennett argues nevertheless that there appears to be some convergence of opinion in the recent literature that community policing is fundamentally a philosophy of policing or a policing paradigm, stating that *"It is generally agreed that these organizational structures and operational strategies do not in themselves represent community policing as they could exist equally well within the context of a different policing philosophy or policing paradigm. However, when they are implemented within a community policing paradigm they become community policing structures and strategies"* (Bennett, 1994, see also Bennett, 1990 & Bennett, 1998). Probably this conceptual blurring is to a large extent the consequence of the fact that COP is more a *prescriptive* model (on how police 'ought to be') than an theory-based empirical statement (on how police 'is').

3. Effects of community oriented policing

After more than twenty years now of promotion of this so-called police model (Ponsaers, 2001) by governments, foundations and leading universities, it is still not clear what effect this has had on police practice (Brodeur, 1998). The results of evaluative research seem to be unimpressive and in some cases non-existent or immeasurable (Greene, 2000; Fielding, 1995). COP is stated to have little or no effect on police practice (Mastrofski & Greene, 1998; Weisburd & Braga, 2006); while e.g. aging and years of service do (Mastrofski & Snipes, 1995).

3.1. Impact on public opinion

Because COP tends to increase the contact between the police and the population, with a minimal use of compulsory measures, it is possible to improve the public satisfaction. But this coping strategy has only limited value, because those who are forced to stay in contact with the police (especially victims and offenders) seem to be precisely those who are mostly dissatisfied about the functioning of the police. This means that COP



programmes have a stronger impact on the improvement of the image than on the effectiveness of the police. This was also demonstrated in research; the most important effect of the implementation of COP was to be found in the improvement of the attitude of the population towards the quality of the service rendered by the police to the public (Brodeur, 1998). Moreover, it became clear that the improvement of the image of the police resulted in an intrinsic goal and was often misused to gain more (financial and personnel) facilities (Sacco, 1998).

3.2. Impact on crime

The most striking results were achieved in programmes directed to intensive problem solving strategies, focussed on so-called "hot spots" (Bailey, 1994; Braga et al, 1999; Leigh, Read & Tilley, 1996). The realization of results nevertheless seemed almost impossible, while the police is confronted with problems they never can resolve (Brodeur, 1998).

The frequently used programmes of "neighbourhood watch" resulted in limited effects on crime. In the best case the feelings of security and the communication between the public and the police are improving. As a result of that, the image of the police is reinforced and the job satisfaction of police officers is raised. But evaluative research demonstrated also that the majority of these initiatives were implemented in a defective way. Also became clear that the involvement of citizens in these initiatives, also in England, was weak (Bennett, 1998).

The difficulties to realize a more intensive collaboration seem to be more serious than most advocates expected. The empowerment of the public by means of a professional marketing strategy is certainly an interesting tool for the improvement of a more functional partnership between the police and the population. But the problems in mobilizing local inhabitants are often more structural of nature. In more deprived neighbourhoods, the lack of collaboration by the public is often a result of feelings of despair and powerlessness, the fear for street gangs, and a deep embedded mistrust and conflict with the police (Rosenbaum, 1998).

On the long run, COP would lead to a more or less important decrease of the number of emergency calls by the public (Brodeur, 1998). COP programmes can have a regressive (instead of progressive) effect, while they are often directed towards the wrong target groups. Those groups within the population that are already organized succeed in using the police to their advantage, while the police feels themselves comfortable in this part of society. In spite of that, research evoked that COP, by means of locally initiated consultations, structures the active participation of the population in problem identification and prioritizing. It gives a channel for external accountability on police



performance. Often it became clear that the initiatives were directed towards the wrong territories and the target groups with the smallest needs (Skogan, 1998).

3.3. Impact on incivilities and fear of crime

Some authors come to the conclusion that COP can have some effect on the perception of crime by the population and on the appreciation of the quality of police care. Moreover, the feelings of insecurity seem to decrease, because of the increased visibility of the police in public space and the intensification of the interaction between the population and the police lead frequently to a better appreciation of the police service. COP seems to have an impact, when neighbourhood problems are tackled and on the fear of crime. In any case, the results of COP are not worse than traditional policing in the control of crime, but the results in tackling incivilities and feelings of insecurity in the communities are better (Greene, 1998).

Bailey, who did a lot of international comparative research on policing, concludes: *"We don't know if community policing works. Most of the time, a small effect can be detected, but sometimes also contradictory results. The best results can be observed in focused activities of problem oriented policing. It is not proven that citizens can act against insecurity in an effective way. Initiatives as "neighbourhood watch" don't have an effect on crime. Most of the time these initiatives work the best there were they are least needed and least where they are necessary. Nevertheless, most authors conclude that it is not the model that is failing, but in first instance the deficient implementation of it"* (Bailey, 1994).

4. A number of positive results

Pessimism should be avoided in this respect. Wycoff en Skogan (1994) state in this context that it *is* possible to bend granite. They report on the results of an evaluation of a successful internal reorganization of a police force, which has had a positive impact on the service of the police within a COP approach. One of the critical factors for successful intensive reform, they warn, is the creation of an instance outside and above the police, holding the police chief and his organization accountable for the realization of the new goals to achieve (Moore, 1992).

Also Aronowitz (1997) points at positive consequences. He argues that the approach has effects for the community: citizens are more involved in the identification of problems in the neighbourhood and the relation with the police improves. Moreover, he stresses that the approach also increases the level of self-help of the citizens. They take a more active role in the maintenance of security and the quality of life in their own



neighbourhood. Another effect has a relation with the maintenance of legal order: not only are citizens more inclined to report to the police, but also the feelings of security improve.

One of the most prominent evaluative sources is the study *Preventing crime: What works, What doesn't, What's promising*. Sherman et al. conducted a systematic review, amongst others on COP (Sherman, Gottfredson, MacKenzie, Eck, Reuter & Bushway, 1997). The group of scholars introduce hypotheses on four levels concerning COP: (1) Neighbourhood Watch programmes are considered to be effective, while they encourage the level of surveillance by inhabitants of neighbourhoods, which leads to the consequence that they have a deterrence effect on criminals; (2) The stream of information stemming from the communities is stimulated towards the police concerning suspects, offenders and suspect circumstances, which leads to an increased probability to arrest offenders. This information exchange improves the problem solving ability of the police; (3) The improvement of information from the police to the public empowers the population to protect oneself, certainly when it concerns recent trends in crime patterns and risks; (4) The credibility and legitimacy of the police is sustained and the population has more confidence in the police, which leads to more compliance to the law by the population.

Sherman et al. conclude that the results of tests concerning these hypotheses are ambiguous. Proof for the assumption that crime prevention is sustained by the increase of information from the population towards the police is not available. For the second and third hypotheses is no evidence available neither. The most important conclusion is nevertheless that there seems to be enough evidence for the fourth hypothesis concerning the legitimacy. There seems to be enough research and evaluation that sustains the presence of a strong correlation between COP on the one hand and the legitimacy of the police and law abiding behaviour by the population on the other hand (Sherman, 1997).

More recently, Sunshine & Tyler have concluded from their research on policing that the evaluation of police *legitimacy* is based on the perception of the way in which people are treated (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). Personal contacts between police and community are crucial – not the perception of the public with regard to how well the police handles crime.

In a study in Latin-American countries, Dammert & Malone (2006) indicate that the inclusion of the public in policing reduces public fear of crime. Although the authors are very careful in drawing this conclusion, they claim that this conclusion is very important in these 'tough-on-crime-countries'.



In this respect, procedural justice also influences the extent to which the public is *willing* to engage in crime prevention. The results of a study by Reisig (2007) show that citizens who judge police practices as fair and respectful are more open for participation in (property) crime prevention. This implies that it is not simply the assessment of effectiveness that influences willingness of the public to participate, but merely the way in which police practices are perceived. This conclusion could be made regardless the level of property crime in the community. In this respect, the use of community policing as a police model can be seen as a crucial element in tackling crime. This finding was supported by empirical research in Australia, in which was found that - when the police apply procedural justice - they are more likely to be judged as legitimate (Murphy, Hinds & Fleming, 2008). At the same time, social survey data showed that foot patrols - a typical practical element in community policing - meets the public demand and supports “*the symbolic function of policing as a sign of social order*” (Wakefield, 2007). Earlier studies had already showed that foot patrols lead to higher levels of citizen’s satisfaction with police services *and* lower crime rates (except for robbery and burglary) (Trojanowicz, 1982). A few years later, however, Pate showed that foot patrols did influence people’s *perceptions* of safety and disorder problems, but did not influence the levels of reported crime (Reisig, 2011).

Reisig (2010) concludes in his study on the effects of community- and problem oriented policing, that in general, the results are encouraging. There is (though modest) evidence for the effects of these types of policing on levels of crime and disorder, and also for the perception of citizens with regard to their neighbourhood (Reisig, 2011). He also concludes that one of the important merits of the introduction of both community policing and problem oriented policing, is that it has instigated empirical research into police strategies and police practices, although of course a number of questions still remain.

A final and very recent (2012) impressive systematic review by Gill et al (Gill, Weisburd, Bennett, Vitter & Telep, *in progress*), gathered both published and unpublished studies that focused on the effectiveness of community oriented policing. This review based their final conclusions on 45 trials, published in 25 reports. Their findings show that community-oriented policing was associated with a statistically significant, but very small reduction in officially recorded crime. But, although the effect on crime figures seems to remain limited, findings for other intended effects, such as legitimacy, citizen satisfaction, fear of crime and citizens’ perceptions of local disorder, were very promising. The results showed a large increase in legitimacy and satisfaction with police, and a (more moderate) increase of odds of perceived social disorder and a decline in the fear of crime. The researchers hypothesized that short term improvements in legitimacy may lead to longer term effects on crime control, but emphasized the need for long-term research.



5. New types of policing take over

Some scholars, as e.g. Manning, argument that the current attempt to consolidate and integrate research progress in community policing, problem solving policing, hot spots policing and crime analysis and crime mapping has collapsed into efforts of apparently preventive but actually active, aggressive- and arrest-oriented policing (Manning & Yursza Warfield, 2009). This reading is supported tacitly by research (Weisburd & Braga, 2006) containing little or no comment on the negative, unanticipated, or destructive impacts such types of policing has on order, sense of justice and "community."

In addition to this, academic literature has also changed its focus and is increasingly moving away from the topic; in their review of police literature in 2007, Mazeika et al conclude that although police strategies have remained the largest category in police literature, 'community policing is no longer the most prevalent literature within this category' - for the first time in six years (Mazeika et al, 2010). Outcome-based research declined with over 32%. The primary focus of research within the category of police strategies (which is, by the way, declining since 2005) is now research on target groups (Mazeika et al, 2010). A positive conclusion of their review was however, that publications on policing have increased substantially, although it was not clear what the effect of this increase was on the distribution of research.

These developments have unfolded in the last twenty years. While many claims have been made, the cumulative progress in research based on deep and critical understanding of policing is modest in part because the research focus is far too narrow. It should therefore be emphasized that more research is needed for a good understanding of effects of police strategies and tactics, taking into account social processes that might influence the effects (Reisig, 2011). It does, after all, affect our society in a fundamental way.



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