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Community Policing ‘Light’: On Proximity and Distance in the Relationship between Neighbourhood Coordinators and Citizens

Barbara van Caem*, Ronald van Steden**, Hans Boutellier*** and Bas van Stokkom****

Abstract Community policing is currently a leading paradigm in Western police forces, not least in the Netherlands. However, in agreement with a mounting body of empirical research around the globe, our conclusion is that community policing strategies in the Netherlands (more precisely in Amsterdam) do not meet the basic principle of close relationships between citizens and the police. Nevertheless, if we were to lower our expectations to a more realistic level, then a modest (or ‘light’) version of community policing might emerge. This version calls for a small number of active citizens, a visible community police officer, and open communication channels between all stakeholders. We argue that such a view of community policing still offers promise, since proximity between police officers and citizens enhances their mutual understanding and cooperation.

Police forces in many Western countries have undergone considerable alterations over roughly the last half century. Relatively simple executive agencies have been modified into complex professional bureaucracies, where the concept of community policing acts as a leading organizational paradigm. At the same time, an ever-expanding body of knowledge serves to underline that the original ambitions, principles and goals of this immensely popular paradigm are hard, if not impossible, to achieve. First of all, both ‘community’ and ‘policing’ are essentially contested

concepts (e.g. Seagrave, 1996; Fielding, 2005). There is no watertight definition of community policing, since the concept is fluid and nebulous. Citizens and police officers alike have disparate opinions about what community policing entails, depending on the temporal and spatial scales of their observations.

Secondly, several scholars have advanced variations on the community policing paradigm, thereby altering, emphasizing or avoiding rudiments of the initial concepts. ‘Problem-oriented’ (Goldstein, 1979), ‘intelligence-led’ (Tilley, 2003),

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‘reassurance’ (Innes, 2004), and ‘predictive’ (Bratton and Malinowski, 2008) strategies have loomed large in academic and practitioners’ circles, and will inevitably have a profound impact on how we envisage community policing. Thirdly, and despite the forgoing, several authors have argued that community police strategies can never function to their full capacity (e.g. Skogan, 2003a; Mastrofski *et al.*, 2007; Chappell, 2009; Terpstra, 2010). There is still quite a serious gap between theory and what is happening in practice.

Fourthly, the political and social conditions under which police forces operate have changed dramatically throughout the Western world. During the past three or four decades, public order has become an urgent political issue due to sharply rising crime rates (Kinsey *et al.*, 1986), the increasing complexity of crime and crime control (Grabosky, 2001), new dangers, such as the threat of terrorism (Murray, 2005), and more general feelings of insecurity (Jackson *et al.*, 2009) and disarray (Pakes, 2004). It will thus come as no surprise that community policing strategies have encountered severe criticism of their overall performance.

The main thrust of the criticism addresses the recurrent discrepancy between what the police do and what citizens expect them to do, and the equally recurrent concern of police forces’ apparent lack of success in reducing crime and disorder. This has repeatedly found expression in a need to measure and improve police work (e.g. Hoogenboezem and Hoogenboezem, 2005; Terpstra and Trommel, 2009). During such exercises, disapproval of excessively harsh—‘zero-tolerance’—policing (Greene, 1999) commonly transforms into disapproval of overly mild or tolerant police operations (Punch *et al.*, 2005), and vice versa. Furthermore, since the onset of the current period of austerity (Innes, 2010), police forces are suddenly being confronted with the challenge of public savings and budget cuts, which may reduce the often taken-for-granted presence of traditional, uniformed, frontline officers in urban neighbourhoods

(Neyroud, 2010). Perhaps, in the longer run, their presence will be increasingly taken over by lower-ranking community support officers and police auxiliaries, such as city wardens and private security staff.

Underlying these difficulties of community policing and the objections to it, lies concealed an internal paradox of police work that is hard to overcome. On the one hand, good policing requires ‘proximity’ to the citizenry; it presupposes that police officers are sufficiently close to know about the problems people experience in their everyday life and how they may be addressed jointly. On the other hand, good policing also calls for the maintenance of a certain ‘distance’ from the citizens in order to intervene in critical situations. This article considers the inherent dichotomy between proximity and distance in debates about community policing in Amsterdam (800,000 inhabitants), capital city of the Netherlands.

Research question

Although the Dutch police had emphasized proximity to the citizenry as early as the 1970s, especially with the implementation of community policing programmes, recent police practice is moving to a more remote position from the citizenry. As a consequence, the Dutch ‘soul’ of community policing, interpreted as closely-knit, lenient relations between the police and citizens has come under pressure (Das *et al.*, 2007). The research reported here focuses specifically on a particular design of community policing by the Amsterdam-Amstelland police, called ‘neighbourhood coordination’ (*buurtregie* in Dutch). Neighbourhood coordination involves the same building blocks as the Dutch style of area-bound community policing, with specific supplementary elements. In addition to proximity, the use of preventive and proactive strategies as well as reactive ones, cooperating with other organizations and mobilizing citizens, the Amsterdam neighbourhood coordinator (*buurtregisseur*) is

expected to govern and regulate cooperation with agencies and citizens in closely constrained urban areas.

In this vein, the neighbourhood coordinator would appear to be pivotal in achieving a balance between proximity to and distance from people, both within his own function and in relation to the actions of the rest of the police organization. The aim of our research is to ascertain how the Amsterdam police force attempts to get closer to citizens through neighbourhood coordination and how people experience their relationship with the police. This leads to the following research question: does neighbourhood coordination bring the police closer to the citizenry? Reflecting on empirical findings, we examine ways to improve community policing in Amsterdam.

Methodology

This research has been conducted by a combination of policy-document analysis, interviews, and a small number of observations (Van Caem, 2012). In total, eight inquiry interviews and 42 semi-structured interviews were held between August 2009 and December 2010, half of them with neighbourhood coordinators and the other half with active citizens and additional key police contacts, such as local caretakers, shopkeepers, and youth workers. The interviews were supplemented with seven participant observation sessions. We conducted the research in seven police wards, one in Amsterdam-North (87,000 inhabitants), three in Amsterdam-Southeast (80,000 inhabitants), and three in Amsterdam-West (130,000 inhabitants). The police wards all struggle with multifaceted social problems, including ethnically diverse neighbourhoods, unruly youngsters, drug-related crimes, enduring poverty, and physical degradation. The rationale behind our selection was that relations between the police and citizens have been fraught with tensions over the years. Local neighbourhood coordinators thus play an important role in terms of improving contacts with people.

Our analysis was informed by dimensions of proximity and distance in neighbourhood coordination. Specifically, the degree of citizen participation in police processes is an important feature of community policing. After all, good community policing is about discovering and responding to citizens' daily problems of crime and disorder, and involving them in police solutions through, for example, meetings with the officer on the beat. Related features of community policing are a problem-oriented stance concerned with the use of local neighbourhood knowledge by police officers and the devolution of authority and responsibility to individual community officers in a local ward (Skogan, 2008). If neighbourhood coordinators in Amsterdam were capable of establishing close contacts with communities and activating residents to take up their ownership of local crime and safety problems, we interpreted such results as potentially leading to closer proximity to citizens. If not, we assume that the gap between police officers and citizens is widening. That is, the police tend largely to ignore the inhabitants of neighbourhoods in such matters as tailor-made community safety solutions, and are likely to adopt a more formal (and arguably punitive) stance vis-à-vis the citizens.

Neighbourhood coordinators in Amsterdam

In the Netherlands, community policing was first implemented with the introduction of community police officers (*wijkagenten*), followed by police ward teams (*wijkteams*) and then area-bound police officers (*gebiedsgebonden politiefunctionarissen*). The trailblazing 1977 police report *Politie in Verandering* (*A Changing Police*) was a milestone marking these adjustments in Dutch policing, as it pleaded for far-reaching integration of the police into society (Punch *et al.*, 2002). The position of neighbourhood coordinator was formally introduced in the Amsterdam-Amstelland

police in the year 2000. This position is characterized by a relatively senior police rank, a substantial additional training program and considerable responsibility for the neighbourhood to which the officer is assigned. The neighbourhood coordinator is an area-bound police officer, who is involved in the governance of security in one of the city's 236 neighbourhoods. Every neighbourhood coordinator belongs to a police ward team, where he or she reports directly to the police ward chief. The 32 ward teams in Amsterdam have flexible schedules to adjust police input as far as possible to the demands on their services.

Ten years of police experience in Amsterdam have contributed to the formulation of a new vision of neighbourhood coordination (Meurs, 2010). In the course of 2010 the Amsterdam-Amstelland force decided to concentrate more closely on 'joined up' (Crawford and Lister, 2004) police work by introducing 'safer neighbourhood teams' and 'safer school teams', two pilot projects consisting of a mix of public (municipal) and private (commercial) agents and agencies, and by adopting a more focused policy on the most 'prominent' people (notorious lawbreakers) and places (such as disorderly squares and drug scenes) in town. This policy has been inspired by British (Innes, 2006) and North American (Braga and Weisburd, 2012) experiments with 'new' community policing: information-led and problem-oriented approaches engaging a wide range of partners. However, the achievement of community policing ideas and ideals has had limited success in Amsterdam. Although all our respondents—citizens and police alike—endorse the principle of police proximity through a combination of low-threshold contact and citizen involvement, in practice, the desired close links between neighbourhood coordinators and their communities remain fairly ineffective. This is partly caused by a lack of commitment from the community itself:

Establishing close contacts with local shopkeepers, particularly from a

non-Dutch background, is difficult. They are hardly organised and refuse to invest in crime prevention and safety measures. (Police ward chief)

Most citizens are not interested in attending evening sessions with the police. [...] Residents of Moroccan origin never show up because of language barriers. (Neighbourhood coordinator)

On the other hand, citizens and local professionals criticize various neighbourhood coordinators for not being visible enough in their neighbourhoods:

Our previous neighbourhood coordinator was much more present in the neighbourhood. He also looked after the youth. I hardly see the current one around. Yes, I consider that a short-coming. (Active citizen)

The police are driven by issues of the day. That is the greatest barrier. The neighbourhood coordinator does not meet his commitments. He is doing office work, while the neighbourhood needs his assistance and help. (Shopkeeper)

Low-threshold contact and citizen involvement both demand the maximum physical presence of neighbourhood coordinators in their designated areas, but the time available for this is shrinking. The next section highlights four substantial factors that impede the proximity of neighbourhood coordinators to citizens.

Explaining limited success

As a first and general explanation, community policing in the Netherlands, which was developed within a strong welfare state with a mild approach to crime, punishment, and incarceration (Downes, 1993), has been criticized for some time (Downes and Van Swaaningen, 2007). The Dutch policing

style, seen as friendly and condoning, is coming under severe pressure in public debates since it is believed that tolerance had gone too far, even to the extent of having a counterproductive effect on crime and disorder. After the turn of the century, terrorist assaults in the West and two political murders in the Netherlands (those of Pim Fortuyn and Theo van Gogh) led to a further shift of police attention towards criminal investigation, counterterrorism, and law enforcement. The Dutch criminal justice system at the start of the 21st century can therefore be depicted in terms of hardened sentencing policies and a move towards police centralization (Cachet and Marks, 2009), which may hamper communication between neighbourhood coordinators and local residents.

Secondly, the Amsterdam police force as a whole has never fully embraced community policing as a means to address crime and disorder problems. The Amsterdam-Amstelland police wards have been short of personnel for years and neighbourhood coordinators experience numerous difficulties in calling on the assistance of colleagues who walk the beat. Moreover, the ways neighbourhood coordinators are directed by police ward chiefs does not involve a proper view of how to put together a relevant team of neighbourhood contacts and active citizens. A fundamental problem is the lack of agreement on a coherent and measurable set of responsibilities that the neighbourhood coordinators must fulfil:

It should be easier to monitor the proceedings and outcomes of community policing. That has always been the problem. What should a neighbourhood coordinator do? How effective is his or her work? This was hardly ever measureable, and, for the most part, it remains that way today. (Neighbourhood coordinator)

This fallacy results in ever-increasing demands on neighbourhood coordinators to carry out extra

tasks, which may hinder good contacts with their communities:

The police have got to meet a ticket quota. These quota also apply to community coordinators. Fining people is part of their job. But it can be rather difficult given the social role neighbourhood coordinators play in their neighbourhood. I nevertheless expect them to issue fines. Neighbourhood coordinators can't leave this to their colleagues all the time. (Police ward chief) I have great confidence in the neighbourhood coordinator, but he has been distracted by many other responsibilities. [...] We need an officer who is present in the neighbourhood on a daily basis. (Active citizen)

The maintenance of public order, administrative duties, and emergency help frequently dominate the perception and planning of urban police wards, which limits the space available for and commitment to community policing. Several neighbourhood coordinators state that they feel themselves to be 'loners' within their own force.

Thirdly, information about local crime and disorder predominantly follows the path from citizens' own experiences to the police. Citizens, however, also want to get information back from neighbourhood coordinators and their colleagues. As long as such mutuality in communication is absent, people will be less inclined to cooperate with the police:

A neighbourhood coordinator is vital for making policing more transparent. I am convinced that citizens will cooperate more actively if they have a better understanding of the police organisation (Neighbourhood coordinator).

The previous two neighbourhood coordinators were very much occupied

with quality-of-living issues. They were always open to discuss problems after I called them or left them a note. And they reported back about measures taken. I miss that now (Active citizen).

For their part, police leaders do not direct citizen involvement, out of a mixture of hesitation and ignorance. Citizens are not infrequently regarded as slackers:

While residents are open to dialogue with the police, active and long-lasting involvement is quite a different story. People do not participate much in local projects (Police ward chief).

Finally, insofar as community policing is concerned with a problem-oriented approach, police ward chiefs pursue their policies by activating their professional networks (such as the 'safer school teams' mentioned above), not by encouraging citizen participation. But even this type of problem-oriented police work has its flaws. We discovered a clash of cultures between the dynamics of neighbourhood networks and the 'red tape' of (excessive) bureaucratic rationality. Hierarchical structures within the police relate poorly to the horizontal networks that neighbourhood coordinators encounter. That makes neighbourhood 'coordination' a rather pretentious concept:

We catch up with the police every six weeks. Every participant has his own tasks and agenda. The police are but one agency among others. They are unable to genuinely coordinate the network (Caretaker).

Neighbourhood coordinators generally depend on professional partners such as civil servants, youth workers, and caretakers, who do not always satisfactorily execute their part of the job. Although neighbourhood coordinators require a pivotal position within local security networks, which calls for

a dedicated amount of support from the police organization, such backup is regularly perceived as inadequate. At the same time, neighbourhood coordinators cherish their independence and discretionary mandate:

I enjoy a lot of freedom. That is the trust I have gained from my line manager. We discuss issues she should know about. I inform her about steps to be taken. In principle, if she prefers other solutions, we also come to an agreement (Neighbourhood coordinator).

Reflections

Neighbourhood coordinators are confronted with a large number of conflicting demands from citizens, police chiefs, colleagues, and professional partners. This regularly involves situations that require swift action, either now or in the immediate future. Not least, the constant disruption from all kinds of ad-hoc tasks makes it difficult for neighbourhood coordinators to implement more thorough, beneficial policies. Our observations more or less parallel research on community policing in general. Specifically, Skogan's (2005) studies in the USA display remarkable similarities with the Dutch case. According to him, adhering to the original principles of community policing turns out to be problematic as a result of faltering organizational infrastructures, sceptical police leaders, a lack of interagency cooperation, and competing stakeholder expectations. The full involvement of citizens in community policing strategies has therefore proved elusive.

That said, a small number of neighbourhood coordinators do achieve wider citizen engagement in their local wards. This usually involves small-scale cooperation with a select group of active citizens:

Of course, you can't mobilise everyone at once. But people do get involved step

by step. Our safer neighbourhood team liaises with 80 residents, who have indicated they would like to be informed about the team's efforts. (Neighbourhood coordinator)

I for example report to the neighbourhood coordinator about alleged domestic violence [...] or about frequent noise nuisance from certain premises. I get this information from the tenants' association. (Active citizen)

Although community policing in its most ideal form is impracticable, a more modest version can thus certainly be achieved. Despite police hesitation and disapproval about peoples' long-term commitment, citizens and local entrepreneurs such as shopkeepers sometimes confine themselves to participating by addressing crime and safety problems and finding possible solutions in cooperation with the neighbourhood coordinator. Indeed, the police focus on 'prominent' people and places, as stated above, may offer a way to improve a problem-oriented strategy connected more closely to a neighbourhood's needs. However, as yet no guarantee of direct citizen participation can be given.

This kind of participation can nevertheless be encouraged by problem-oriented work in small-scale partnerships with a limited number of active citizens and professionals, combined with a visible presence of the neighbourhood coordinator. Where police proximity to citizens is concerned, low-threshold contacts with neighbourhood coordinators, maintaining open communication channels to all partners, and the decent treatment of people are essential components. Following Tyler (2004), the citizens' judgment is not primarily influenced by the outcome of the police intervention, but by the extent to which they perceive that the neighbourhood coordinator has respected them, has actually listened to them, has done everything possible to help solve their problem, and has

informed them honestly. Most citizens do not have unrealistic expectations about the police, but they do demand a certain degree of transparency and recognition (see also Van den Broeck, 2002). They want to know what they can expect from the neighbourhood coordinators and if results have been achieved, but also if results have fallen short of expectations, and if the police have made mistakes.

Intriguingly, as Skogan (2006) has found, a negative encounter with the police has an effect on peoples' judgements about the quality of police services that is no less than four to fourteen times greater than a positive experience. No matter how hard neighbourhood coordinators try to solidifying their relationship with communities, one mistake may outweigh much of the good work done. It is thus obviously in the police's own interest that people are better informed in a more structured way about the successes as well as the failures of community policing strategies. Such community policing—or neighbourhood coordination—'light' is better than no community policing at all, since closer proximity to citizens turns out to be invaluable in ensuring that people continue to believe that the police are willing to protect them. Only accessible neighbourhood coordinators are able to win the hearts and minds of citizens, without whom the police cannot function effectively.

Conclusions and recommendations

In light of widespread discontent about a widening gap between police forces and citizens, many Western countries have sought to build up ongoing programs of community policing, thus attempting to enhance the quality of interaction between the police and the general public. As we have seen, the Amsterdam police force had made only minor progress towards the realization of close police–citizen contacts. Much more needs to be done to embrace the originally high hopes of community policing. Indeed, and in line with Greene's (2000) earlier

ironic remarks on developments in the USA, the road to community policing seems largely paved with good intentions. Even so, our findings do not intend to completely deconstruct or abandon the strategy of community policing. On the contrary, neighbourhood coordination 'light' is a realistic prospect for community policing to counteract the trend of increasing distance between the police and the citizenry in the Netherlands and elsewhere. We present four recommendations.

The first is to anchor the involvement of a relatively small group of active citizens in mini-coalitions by introducing carefully structured alliances between neighbourhood coordinators, professional partners such as youth workers, local inhabitants and entrepreneurs who can choose 'prominent' problems on which the police should act. The second recommendation is to organize better support of community policing by the police force, both from the neighbourhood coordinator's own ward and from the central organisation. Having the police ward chiefs direct the process of community policing ensures a better internal network for the neighbourhood coordinator, creates a clearer division of labour between neighbourhood coordinators, their immediate colleagues and more distant network partners, and encourages useful information flows such as weekly updates of crime record analyses.

Thirdly, central support should be concerned with 'empowering' (Fung, 2004) small-scale deliberations between citizens and the police at the neighbourhood level, the joint setting of priorities, and gatherings in the form of monthly neighbourhood panels. Such alliances need to meet the following democratic requirements: the selection and instruction of neighbourhood representatives, the ability of other neighbourhood inhabitants to form an opinion about what those representatives do, and the possibility to criticize their performance (Sørensen and Torfing, 2005). Matters of representation should not be overstated, since case studies demonstrate that the problems participants bring to beat meetings generally reflect those of their

non-participating neighbours (Skogan, 2003b). An observable middle-class bias in community policing is not necessarily problematic.

A final recommendation is to optimize the flows of information between neighbourhood coordinators and citizens by continuous feedback about actions taken and results achieved. Our study indicates that people not only want to offer information to the police, but also that they expect information to be fed back to them much more frequently and of much better quality than is currently the case. Succeeding in such mutual communications is not an easy job. Given the porous contours of community policing, it is reasonable to expect that programs, activities, and methods will vary across police wards (see also Maguire and Mastrofski, 2000). This is nonetheless inevitable as neighbourhoods suffer from a wide array of problems and must rely on pragmatic problem-solving approaches.

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