

N8 Policing Research Partnership

Community Engagement: Evidence Review

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Background

Principles of community engagement have become central to the role of the police and particularly the current approach of neighbourhood policing. Community engagement can foster collaboration between police and local people to identify and tackle local policing issues, and is associated with positive police-community relations and mutually beneficial outcomes. This review identifies the benefits of community engagement, barriers to its effective implementation and transferable methods of effective practice.

Key findings

- Community engagement is a central component of democratic policing and informs the Peelian principle that the power of the police to fulfil their functions and duties is dependent on public approval of their existence, actions and behaviour, and on their ability to secure and maintain public legitimacy and respect.
- Community engagement is more than the interaction between a police officer and a citizen. It should be understood as a wider and longer term 'process' of collaboration between police and communities, in which local people are willing, purposefully enabled and empowered to participate.
- Community engagement can be enabled through a range of structures (e.g. community meetings, advisory panels, oversight committees), giving the public opportunity to participate in policing processes (e.g. audit, consultation, oversight) and which involve police sharing information with the public.
- Public participation in police-community engagement activities is often low relative to the general willingness to participate in and contribute to local policing efforts.
- Barriers to participation include absence of suitable civic structures, lack of public awareness of opportunities, cynicism that any contribution will make a difference, bureaucratic processes, and personal characteristics such as having limited time, low levels of English and poor education.
- Setting realistic expectations of inputs and outcomes attaining to processes of engagement can help avoid cynicism and disenchantment among local publics, and therein foster further willingness to participate.
- Barriers from the police perspective include training, cost, transient deployment of resources, and the increasing diversity of neighbourhoods making the process of community engagement more challenging.
- Inclusive facilitation of open public meetings can foster deliberative consultation and help to ensure meetings are not dominated by vocal minorities. But other less formal methods (e.g. *ad hoc* encounters) can help to ensure that 'quieter voices' within the community are heard and equitably responded to.
- Effective community engagement requires matching methods to particular purposes. A mix of engagement mechanisms can help to foster effective deliberation when addressing potentially divisive concerns.
- Policing approaches that focus on treating people fairly and with respect can improve participation in policing by promoting the legitimacy of the police and the law. This is likely to be a cost-effective way of promoting the full range of benefits associated with community engagement.

1. Defining Community Engagement

'Community engagement' is a broad term that includes a range of activities, purposes and ambitions. In policing, it is sometimes (mis-)used to refer to any interaction between a police officer and a citizen, be it a conversation or a fleeting encounter. Instead, community engagement should be understood as a wider, longer term and planned 'process' of collaboration between police and members of the local community. A recent report by the National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA) defines community engagement ([Myhill, 2012](#)) as:

The process of enabling the participation of citizens and communities in policing at their chosen level, ranging from providing information and reassurance, to empowering them to identify and implement solutions to local problems and influence strategic priorities and decisions.

The police, citizens and communities must have the willingness, capacity and opportunity to participate. The Police Service and partner organisations must have a responsibility to engage and, unless there is a justifiable reason, the presumption is that they must respond to community input.

The term 'community' alone is problematic, however. It is used as shorthand for a group of people, assumed to share a set of characteristics and sense of identity; although sometimes both can be absent. There are three 'types' of community, including 'of place', 'of identity', and 'of interest'. The police mostly focus on a place-based notion of community, at a 'neighbourhood' level. This pragmatic approach recognises that people tend to live in a physical space in proximity with others, even if they belong to other types of communities as well. For community engagement to be most effective, however, police need to engage meaningfully with the different communities within a neighbourhood, and be sensitive to the diversity within and between each.

2. Benefits

Community engagement is associated with several beneficial outcomes, including improved public perceptions of safety and actual decreases in crime and disorder ([Myhill, 2012](#)). Such outcomes can create stronger communities by providing a basic level of neighbourhood security that produces the conditions in which informal social controls can flourish ([Innes & Jones, 2006](#)). Community engagement can also help make policing more understanding of and responsive to local communities, through for example processes of consultation, partnership and collaboration, resulting in increased public satisfaction, cooperation, trust and confidence in the police. There is also evidence of improved morale, job satisfaction and motivation for officers, associated with a broadening of the police role, improved relationships with the public and co-workers, and raised expectations regarding community participation in crime prevention ([Myhill, 2012; Lloyd & Foster, 2009](#)).

These benefits have been widely associated with the introduction of 'neighbourhood policing' across England and Wales during the last decade. Premised on the ideal that public accountability is best delivered through locally-responsive policing teams, neighbourhood policing has sought to embed community engagement as a mainstream policing activity. In particular, it has laid emphasis on the benefits of accessible and familiar policing which, it is believed, promote community involvement in identifying local priorities and collaborative problem-solving with partners and the public to address priorities.

3. Barriers

Policy reviews suggest there is a general willingness among the public to participate in local policing ([e.g. Casey, 2008](#)). Despite this, however, participation in policing has tended to be low, particularly for some groups, raising concerns of representation. The following factors have been found to inhibit participation:

- personal characteristics e.g. having insufficient time, poor written or spoken English skills, poor education, and disabilities and health problems ([Audit Commission, 1999](#));
- lack of confidence in the police, possibly linked to poor relations with the police historically;
- fear of crime, undermining trust in other members of the community and preventing engagement with the police because of fear of reprisals ([Lloyd & Foster, 2009](#));
- lack of awareness both of neighbourhood structures and opportunities to participate in policing;

- cynicism that any public input would bear substantial impact or influence on police decisions;
- public apathy and frustration with the time consuming and bureaucratic processes which have to be followed before police are able to consider their concerns and views ([Bullock & Sindall, 2004](#)).

From a police perspective, barriers to effective community engagement include:

- the increasing social, ethnic, cultural and political diversity of neighbourhoods;
- the often transient deployment of police personnel to local policing teams ([Flanagan, 2008](#));
- the relative status it is afforded within the institutional and occupational cultures of police compared to other contingent work demands that fall on the police ([Hughes & Rowe, 2006](#));
- the costs associated with training officers to perform community engagement, funding the number of officers required to do this effectively, and supporting the full range of engagement methods to ensure representative and inclusive participation ([Myhill, 2012](#); [Audit Commission 1999](#));
- much community engagement training is classroom-based or on placement, which is less effective than training experienced in a situated workplace environment ([Heslop, 2012](#)).

4. Effective Practice

The practice of community engagement can be enabled through various structures which reflect different degrees of public participation and community empowerment in local policing. Examples include hosting pre-arranged meetings in local communities, organising lay panels and co-opting community representatives on to formal partnership committees. Such structures can serve a range of functions (e.g. consultation, advisory, oversight), but all involve information sharing by the police which aims to facilitate public participation.

Raising awareness of local neighbourhood policing can significantly increase participation in local policing activities ([Bullock & Sindall, 2004](#)). This can be achieved by effective publicity campaigns, as well as by the role of police and others in bringing consultative meetings to the attention of local people. A person's level of education has been found to be a significant general predictor of awareness and participation in community policing, suggesting that additional provision may be needed for raising awareness among groups with less formal education ([Skogan & Steiner, 2004](#)).

Open public meetings are a common method of engagement, but are associated with low participation particularly of young people. The Audit Commission ([1999](#)) advocates increasing public participation by taking the practice of consultation to the people, for example, by talking to people at venues they already attend. It also suggests that attendance can be increased by creating a 'community event atmosphere', for example, providing refreshments and childcare facilities, and making an event more 'entertaining' by using participative and interactive consultation methods, rather than merely having speakers 'talk at' those who attend.

Public participation has been reported especially low among poorer people living in high crime areas ([Lloyd & Foster, 2009](#)). This demonstrates how community policing can add to, rather than alleviate aspects of social and economic inequality. It also highlights the need for engagement practices to promote inclusivity, rather than merely engaging the 'usual suspects' (or 'easy to reach') who may routinely exploit consultation opportunities for their own ends. Managing vocal minorities through good facilitation at meetings is essential for ensuring representative participation, and can prevent community conflict, which can be an unintended consequence of direct participation.

Many ethnic minority groups have representative organisations. But consulting these groups on a delegated basis is not an adequate substitute for engaging directly with individuals ([Audit Commission, 1999](#)). One way of reaching individuals is for community organisations to encourage people to get involved in their community activities. Socially excluded people lack formal organisations to represent them in most neighbourhoods and so they will often need dedicated strategies to them. So-called 'quiet groups' who are less visibly represented in local communities can be targeted through informal posting letters, knocking on doors, street talking and beat engagement ([Lloyd & Foster, 2009](#)).

Effective community engagement requires matching methods to the particular purpose. Some consultation techniques, for instance, may be less suitable for tackling issues where strong feelings or prejudices already exist. Holding public meetings can give local people a chance to vent their frustrations and convince them that the authorities are willing to hear people's concerns and respond accordingly. But such forums do not always produce considered debate. It is important that diverse community demands for and expectations of local policing are subject to rationale dialogue and constructive negotiation. Techniques that are both participative and deliberative, such as citizen panels, have been reported to be more useful for tackling sensitive issues ([Audit Commission, 1999](#)).

Strategies that aim to improve the interpersonal aspects of police encounters with the public have been found to improve participation. Where the police act in ways that make people feel they are being treated fairly and with respect, this makes them more likely to trust the motives of the police and to develop a sense of obligation to accept and follow the decisions of police officers and the law more broadly ([Tyler, 2006](#)). People are also more likely to report crime, and to participate in and attend community-police meetings ([Murphy et al., 2008](#)). In times of austerity, focusing on procedural justice may offer a way for the police to achieve 'more with less' ([Hough, 2013](#)).

5. Conclusion

Principles of community engagement have long been central to British policing, recognised for their role in promoting public consent for and cooperation with the police. These principles were briefly undermined by attempts to professionalise the police during latter part of the twentieth century, but have been revived over the last three decades, particularly more recently by the introduction of neighbourhood policing. This programme has been associated with a range of beneficial outcomes including stronger communities, more effective, motivated officers, reduced crime and disorder and increased perceptions of neighbourhood safety. The studies underpinning these outcomes are mainly of multi-mechanism programmes, making it difficult to isolate the impact of individual components. Thus, there is a rationale for research into which practices work best in which contexts and through which mechanisms of change.

That said, the literature suggests that public participation can be maximised by raising awareness of local policing activities, establishing structures and processes that afford opportunity for active public engagement, and adopting approaches that treat people fairly and considerately. Further, effective and sustainable community engagement requires well-trained, resourced and highly localised policing teams able to match a range of engagement methods to particular groups and consultation purposes. Participative and deliberative methods must be inclusive, interesting, transparent and not too onerous or bureaucratic. Setting realistic expectations of inputs and outcomes attaining to processes of engagement can help avoid cynicism and disenchantment among local publics, and therein foster further willingness to participate.

Further Information

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