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Reassurance Policing in Practice: Views from the Shop Floor

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Abstract

Recent years have seen falls in recorded crime in England and Wales, although the perception for many has remained that crime is rising. This has been dubbed the *reassurance gap* and is closely related to concerns over fear of crime and public confidence in the police. *Reassurance policing* (RP) is seen as a means to address this 'gap'. But is RP simply community policing repackaged? Does it offer more than improved public relations? As a concept, RP has been evolving since the late-1990s and in October 2003 the Home Office funded National Reassurance Policing Programme (NRPP) was launched with pilot sites located in eight police force areas. Prior to this, RP was developed and trialled in two of these forces, and was closely informed by the signal crimes perspective under development by Innes and colleagues. The authors were involved in monitoring progress made by the two initial forces, and in assessing the readiness of the remaining six for participation in the NRPP. This paper draws on interviews and focus groups held with key stakeholders from both police and partnership agencies.

Introduction

Crime rates, as recorded by national counts and by the British Crime Survey (BCS), have been falling since the mid-1990s (Simmons and colleagues 2002). However, there has been a lag in perception with many people believing that crime is on the increase (see Audit Commission, 1999). This gap in perception has been dubbed the *reassurance gap* (ACPO 2001a); in simple terms, if crime is going down, then the public need to be reassured that the police are doing their job. Concurrent to this has been concern that fear of crime is too high and public confidence in policing too low. Reassurance policing (RP) has been seen as a means to address these concerns. However, assumptions over high fear of crime may be misplaced in that some BCS measures - *worry* about burglary, car crime and violent crime – have

recently seen significant falls (Allen and Wood 2003; Christopherson *et al.*, 2004). Although the accuracy of fear of crime measures has been contested (e.g. Ditton *et al.*, 2000; Irving, 2001) if anything, they are thought to over-estimate the problem (see Farrall and Gadd, 2004). During 2003 BCS indicators of perceived disorder and anti-social behaviour also started to fall (Christopherson *et al.*, 2004). The contention that public confidence in the police is declining finds support in BCS statistics (Mirrlees-Black, 2001), and in the work of other academics (FitzGerald *et al.* 2002; Hough 2003).

The focus of RP was initially envisaged by HMIC as providing a more visible, familiar and accessible police force (Povey, 2001), and by ACPO as a move away from a police performance culture based on volume crime figures (see ACPO 2001a). However, since its inception there have been other versions of reassurance as a concept, and different interpretations of how it should be put into practice (see Millie and Herrington, 2005). This paper considers RP as it was applied in the National Reassurance Policing Programme (NRPP). This programme started with trial sites in two force areas, expanding to include projects in eight police forces in autumn 2003 – it was due to finish 31st March 2005¹. The programme was closely linked to the signal crimes perspective under development by Martin Innes and colleagues (see e.g. Innes and Fielding, 2002). Our involvement in the NRPP was twofold: firstly in monitoring the progress made in the initial trial sites (Millie, 2003); and secondly in assessing the readiness of the six forces to join the programme from October 2003 (Millie *et al.*, 2003).² The authors worked closely with the Police Foundation throughout (e.g. Irving and Bourne, 2003).

In this paper we consider what the NRPP approach entailed and why it emerged as a new form of policing at this particular time. We then consider the views from the shop floor; in other words those tasked with implementing the approach. Our focus is how RP was thought to differ from other forms of community-oriented policing already in existence in the project areas and how the approach fitted in with other policing demands. The paper draws on

¹Some work will continue under the 'Neighbourhood Policing Programme'

² This work was funded by the Association of Chief Police Officers

interviews and focus groups held with key stakeholders, involving approximately 140 people from both police and partnership agencies. The ongoing developmental nature of reassurance policing necessitates the caveat that our comments are based upon observations made during the early stages of the NRPP.

Why now?

Over the last seven years or so there has been a change in policing to a focus on volume crimes - such as domestic burglary and street crime - with success, or indeed otherwise, measured by Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs). There has been an emphasis on number counting, with community-oriented policing and lower level disorder/anti-social behaviour problems falling down the order of priority. It has been recognised that this 'modernization' process may have done more harm than good to community relations and public confidence in policing (see Hough, 2003) and that the balance between a performance culture and community policing needed to be redressed (e.g. Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2002; Povey, 2001).

In line with this, more recently there has been increased awareness of lower-level disorder, and the political agenda has been shifting with a greater emphasis put on tackling the new 'evil' - anti-social behaviour (as reflected in the Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003). Calls for a visible policing presence within communities - to address so called 'quality of life' issues - have resulted in an extension of the policing family (e.g. the introduction of Police Community Support Officers - PCSOs). Whether such developments signal a genuine change of policing philosophy is a discussion for another paper. However, despite the rhetoric, the focus on police performance has not been removed, and BVPIs are still seen as all-important measures of force success.

Whatever the reasons behind a renewed focus on 'quality of life' and community issues, this provided the background for the development of what has become known as reassurance policing. It also provided the opportunity

for Martin Innes and colleagues at the University of Surrey to trial their 'signal crime perspective'.

So what is RP?

A cynic might argue that RP is nothing more than a public relations exercise, with the police presenting a more friendly face in an attempt to prove that they *really* care about their communities. The approach has already acquired the nicknames '*there, there* policing' or '*big hug* policing', and for many it has been interpreted as another attempt at community policing under a new name, rather than a new approach in itself. The potential problem was identified by Fitzgerald *et al.* who observed:

If reassurance policing yields reductions in crime and disorder as well as reassurance, it is hard to see how it differs from effective policing. If it *doesn't* yield these reductions, the case for it needs careful scrutiny. It is difficult to justify devoting limited police resources to policing activity that serves only to give people the *impression* they are safer from crime. (2002: 132).

The model adopted by the NRPP had the dual focus of providing public reassurance *and* reducing crime and disorder. If this is nothing more than 'effective policing', then this is at least a change in direction from a focus solely on volume crime. For the NRPP, reducing crime and disorder and increasing public reassurance were intrinsically linked, the aim being to identify the crimes or disorders for an area that act as key 'signals' detrimentally affecting the way the public view the area. The central tenants of this signal crimes perspective were:

- That disorder and crime are functionally equivalent and of similar form, and are not causally linked;

- That particular acts of crime and social control disproportionately affect how individuals and communities experience and construct their beliefs about crime, disorder and control; and
- Particular crime or disorder signals can be identified and countered by control signals.

(See Innes, 2004; Innes and Fielding, 2002; Innes *et al.*, 2002)

Signal crimes draws from Sampson and Raudenbush's work in Chicago on community efficacy (1999); other work on the Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy (e.g. Skogan and Hartnett, 1997); and criminological thinking going back to 'broken windows' (Wilson and Kelling, 1982) - along with their critiques (e.g. Harcourt, 2001). From the risk literature the main influence has been Slovik's (1992) work on risk perception, which identifies different risks as having different signal values.³

As applied by the NRPP, these 'signals' were identified through a range of techniques, including surveying residents and in-depth qualitative interviews. This evidence was set alongside the results of an environmental audit of the area in question – involving officers observing and recording signs which may prove to act as signals of crime, disorder or control. The aim was that, once the dominant signals were identified, resources would be focused on acting on these, thereby providing reassurance to the public that the police are listening to their concerns *and* acting on them. Whilst the NRPP anticipated that the main signals causing concern would be disorders or anti-social behaviour, the signal crimes perspective is clear that they could also be more serious crime – and in some areas may even be the same as the BVPIs. The key to the programme was that whichever signals were locally identified, these would be prioritised as much as is practicable. Dealing with these signals made the NRPP more ambitious than just providing a more visible police presence, which for many epitomises traditional community policing approaches (although, this may certainly be part of the suggested solution).

³ For an explanation of the approach's theoretical background see Innes and Fielding (2002). For the NRPP see www.reassurancepolicing.com

Is it just another version of existing community policing?

So how does RP differ from other community-policing approaches? As outlined, the NRPP followed a signal crimes perspective with 'the community' identifying what key signals need to be focused upon. However, some may argue that this is what community-policing initiatives have been doing all along via existing consultation arrangements. As such there may be the temptation simply to re-badge pre-existing community projects. Indeed, most of the NRPP forces did have, or were planning to operate, other forms of community-oriented policing, such as:

- Safer Neighbourhood Teams⁴ – the piloting and then roll out of dedicated community policing teams to each ward/neighbourhood (comprising one sergeant, two constables and three PCSOs)
- Community Safety Action Zones⁵ – a partnership approach introduced in one of the London RP project areas
- Township Policing – a geographic structure for policing introduced by Greater Manchester Police where officers have responsibility for particular areas
- Geographic Policing – similar to Township Policing and introduced by Lancashire Constabulary
- Micro-beat policing⁶ – an extension of the geographic model, where each officer is given responsibility for a sub-division of each beat – as introduced by West Midlands Police

If we are looking to distinguish RP, we might view these approaches as providing structure to community policing; RP is able to work within these structures and provide a theoretically robust working methodology. Alternatively, implementing RP in areas where community-policing initiatives already exist may mean that officers assume they are adhering to a signal crimes model, but continue working within an established community policing style, or assume that they already know what the 'signal' crimes will be. There

⁴ www.met.police.uk/saferneighbourhoods

⁵ www.bexley.gov.uk/service/bcsp/csaz.html

⁶ www.west-midlands.police.uk/recruitment/home_policing.htm

is scope for confusion over what initiatives are called and what approach is being taken.

While these are concerns, we take the more optimistic view in that - by following the signal crimes methodology - RP does offer something new, albeit drawing on a theoretical and practical policing heritage. The NRPP has provided a timely framework for reassurance, as the phrase develops its buzz-word status. In the words of one officer;

When you've got an emerging product as [we] have...it allows the framework that if you're bumbling around thinking, 'well what's all this reassurance'...it provides some markers. (Sergeant)

Views from the shop floor

What did those tasked with the delivery of RP think about it as a concept? When we spoke to police officers who were - or would be - involved in the NRPP, it became apparent that they were most interested in how it would impact upon their work 'on the shop floor'.

Many police officers saw the approach as requiring them to be visible, familiar and accessible to communities. This is in line with the HMIC Open All Hours conception of reassurance (Povey, 2001). Most saw this as achievable through an expansion of the existing 'community' or 'beat' officer role, allowing beat officers to build community relationships without fear of being abstracted (e.g. to 'man up' under-strength response teams). As one constable observed, 'At least reassurance means that there will be one identifiable police officer for each area, which is what the community want. They want someone to turn to'⁷.

⁷ See also Millie and Herrington (2005)

'Walking the beat' was thought to be an important part of reassurance, although most recognised that this was not enough in itself, and that they also needed to make an effort to have *meaningful* contact with communities and publicise their presence. In this sense it was seen as more than just a matter of having more police officers on the beat, although, inevitably some were of this view.

RP was also seen to be the sharing of community problems, and working with partnership agencies to tackle these together. Many felt that RP provided the opportunity to formalise working relationships, and for others it gave the opportunity to kick start some of the more challenging interactions and add a bit of 'clout' to requests to, for example, clean up graffiti or improve street lighting.

As an extension of this, there was a belief among officers that the police, and their partners, needed to consult communities - in line with the underlying premise of the signal crimes perspective. This was often thought to be easier said than done, with some officers that we spoke to noting that failures by the police to listen in the past meant that 'barriers' had gone up in some communities, and that more than a list of promises would be needed to regain that trust.

The final component was thought to be the advertising of crime fighting successes, so that the local community could see what their *real* risk was and hopefully would not be so fearful. Again, this was easier said and done, and local press were often said to exaggerate and sensationalise local criminality. A balance needed to be struck, and the importance of having the media on side was a lesson learnt - and indeed acted upon - as the project was rolled-out and media strategies became part of project management plans for many sites.

In addition to these procedural aspects of the RP approach, many officers described the overall ethos as making quality of life issues a policing concern, and encouraging them to pay attention to incivilities. One constable saw his

role prior to the NRPP as follows: 'Whereas before, from a police perspective you might see rubbish on the footpath and graffiti, and you didn't consider it part of your remit – you are concerned with dealing with crime and responding to calls'. Similarly another constable interviewed saw reassurance policing as 'a move away from fire-brigade policing'. Officers also saw reassurance as a route to improve community confidence and cooperation with the police, and ultimately impacting upon levels of criminal behaviour.

Issues applying RP

Despite the enthusiastic response we encountered from many we spoke to, a number of issues were raised about how reassurance fitted into day-to-day policing, and what problems there might be when trying to apply the concept.

First and foremost there were concerns that until this type of policing became a priority, activities that were counted through BVPIs would continue to take primacy - we were often told that 'what gets counted gets done':

Everything's been geared towards crime. That's the way we're driven, toward dealing with crime rather than social disorder and youth causing annoyance or juvenile nuisance, whatever you would like to call it. We seem to get driven really from government...and them saying 'what are you doing about robbery, what are you doing about this?' (Inspector)

A related concern voiced by officers was the ability to ring-fence the time of reassurance officers. The experience of the trial sites in particular highlighted that competing demands on divisional resources often led to officer abstractions, with those tasked to reassurance diverted to sure-up response teams, or for aid or duties in other areas of the force. There was a recognised need that time should be ring-fenced as much as practicably possible. Without this communities could not have the consistency they needed, and officers would have difficulty engaging with local people and gaining their trust. Where effective ring-fencing was in place, the benefits were noted. For example;

Because [name of officer] is a [dedicated reassurance officer] she can't be abstracted. If she wasn't here the community would only have me for approximately eight hours every other week, and the council would have the hump because of all the abstractions. I think the residents of the ward are doing quite well out of it. We can develop better partnerships because [the dedicated reassurance officer] is available during normal office hours and can make meetings etc. I think that the volume of work the police do has made us unreliable – we've bitten off more than we can chew. (Constable)

The idea of ring-fencing was seen to extend to a commitment by officers in reassurance roles to stay in post long enough to allow things to at least get up and running; a concern often exacerbated by the frequency of staff turnover. That said, the developmental nature of the project meant that some compromises had to be made at the early stages due to resource pressures:

One of the primary concerns was to get good quality officers on board...and the problem of having officers with certain types of skills is that there is great demand on their time. ...It doesn't sound like a lot, but to ring-fence eight officers for our borough, when you look at the overall staffing profile, is a big, big commitment. So what we do is ring-fence them for anything but duties that actually require their [extra] skills. Unfortunately with the sort of skills [they have] that is quite often. (Chief Inspector)

Other projects in the NRPP were more successful in maintaining dedicated reassurance officers. Additionally, many of those interviewed thought that PCSOs were a valuable resource to RP, providing a further visible community contact. Nonetheless, this was only if they were properly trained, willing to take on a proactive community liaison role, and were dedicated to the area concerned.

Selling the concept to response teams

There was recognition that the concept also needed to be sold to response teams, and that it should be an integral part of *all* policing, rather than just the concern of reassurance officers and/or PCSOs. However, many officers felt that the workload of response team officers, coupled with apathy towards community-focused policing by many, meant that reassurance was regarded as nothing to do with them:

On [response teams] you are tied to the radio and never get time to do things properly. You're judged on every measurable part of your day, from stops, to arrests, to response times – so you're very busy. Most [response officers] are more interested in completing their shift and going home in one piece. Reassurance is not very relevant to them. They're policing's quick fix to an immediate problem. The two are linked, but they are not necessarily relevant to each other. (Constable)

Many officers we spoke to were aware that a lot of good work could be undone by casual remarks - about the crime rate for example - made by response officers attending calls. As such, it was felt that reassurance needed to be a 'golden thread' running through all aspects of policing, rather than being a bolt on extra that was the concern of a small number of officers (see Millie and Herrington, 2005). As one officer said:

When [response officers] go and deliver their response function, if you haven't got officers delivering reassurance in that silo too, then potentially they can go and destroy many hours and many days of really good work – just by an inappropriate response. (Chief Inspector)

As part of the NRPP, 'reassurance' was later incorporated into the divisional Tasking and Coordination meetings – which direct local police resource allocation as part of the National Intelligence Model. This hopefully raised its profile among non-reassurance officers.

Having a clear identity

In line with our earlier observations, some officers thought there needed to be a clear and consistent identity for the project, which would allow police, partners and communities to understand - and be able to engage with – what is going on. In one of the sites a constable observed; ‘One of the major problems right from the outset was, when the reassurance project was announced, it was also called [x] and [y]. That was three names in about a week, and it all got very confusing’. Without this distinction, RP and community policing were at risk of being confused – with the potential that even those delivering the programme would become unable to tell where traditional community policing stopped and RP began. For example,

I’m a beat manager...which is not technically part of reassurance [in our area]. I have my beat and I look after it. Then you’ve got [dedicated reassurance officers]. They get the whole beat and they are able to get funding for certain things. The way I see it is that we all do the same job, we’ve just got different names, we do the same stuff. (Constable)

Discussion

From our interviews and observations it became clear that RP was thought - by those involved in the NRPP - to be capable of achieving a whole range of objectives, including:

- To reduce fear of crime
- To increase public confidence in the police
- To increase community efficacy
- To improve intelligence gathering
- To reduce crime
- To reduce anti-social behaviour
- To provide structure to community policing
- To improve the local environment – both physical and social
- To provide legitimacy to local policing decisions
- To facilitate consensus policing

As we have noted elsewhere (Millie and Herrington, 2005: 53) these are ambitious concepts. From this list we believe the approach provides a good opportunity to first improve confidence in the police and provide legitimacy to local policing decisions. Once these two principles are in place, then the other objectives become increasingly possible – and likely. Utilising a signal crimes perspective to identify and tackle the issues that are of local concern, the NRPP permitted the public to have a direct input in defining local policing priorities (Innes, 2004), which should then increase confidence in policing and policing decisions. However, in order to succeed the approach needs to stay true to the theoretical underpinnings that make it distinct from wider community policing. Without this, reassurance policing - as articulated through the NRPP - could quite easily be swept up with other community policing approaches. Recent emphasis on ‘neighbourhood policing’, as shown in the Police Reform White Paper (HMSO, 2004), perhaps makes this even more likely.

Reassurance policing is about tackling the specific issues that cause communities concern, but we often heard officers comment that they *already* knew what these problems were, and what the public would want done. Indeed they might be right, but if these assumptions become the basis upon which issues are tackled - rather than adhering to the signal crimes methodology - then reassurance is likely to become a low-level disorder or anti-social behaviour focused initiative. This may have value, but it is likely to have less of an impact on confidence and legitimacy.

For RP to be taken seriously by *all* policing, then problems of ring-fencing and the approach’s apparent conflict with BVPI policing needs to be resolved. If RP is to prove its worth beyond the life of the NRPP, it is essential that the ‘reassurance’ and ‘signal crimes’ labels do not just become validation bolt-ons to community – or neighbourhood – policing in general, and those involved pay heed to the philosophy of the approach.

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