

Improving the effectiveness of partnerships in community safety

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KEY WORDS

community safety
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ABSTRACT

The use of 'problem solving' as a strategy to tackle the underlying causes of crime and disorder, rather than continually responding to their symptoms, has suffered widely from 'implementation failure'. This study describes the variables associated with failure, and shows how a UK constabulary, by ensuring compliance with good practice, raised success rates from 33% to 80% in the partnership initiatives with which it was involved.

The high emotional cost of crime and disorder (Hough, 1995), together with a financial cost exceeding £50 billion a year (H.M. Treasury, 1998), ensures that the subject maintains a high profile on the political agenda. If government policy were to ultimately find success in reducing crime and disorder it would stimulate optimism, investment, employment, and productivity as well as wasting less of the nation's economy on repair and incarceration. However, as so many conditions contribute to the commission of crime & disorder the government have made it clear that partnership exists as the only viable long-term strategy to deliver a sustainable solution. This is also a common theme across Europe, North America, and Australasia.

The police response has been a strategy known as 'problem oriented policing' or 'problem solving' (Goldstein, 1990). Here, rather than continually responding to symptoms (ie, youths causing damage), the police engage with partners to provide solutions which impact upon their underlying causes (in this example arranging for a youth club or another diversionary activity). From this a 4-step implementation process evolved:

- scanning to identify the problem;
- analysis to establish the conditions that generate the problem;
- a partnership response to tackle the underlying issues;
- followed by assessment of the outcome.

Unfortunately, successful implementation has proved elusive. Her Majesties Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC, 1998) found only 17 of 335 national initiatives (5%) were evaluated as being successful. Indeed the phenomenon known as 'implementation failure' is reported as an enormous problem (Tonry & Farrington, 1995).

There appear to be a number of fundamental and historic explanations for the failure of the police to engage successfully in partnership initiatives.

Perhaps the most fundamental is that the police have neither the skills nor the inclination to do so. Although no studies in the USA and England have found that evidence exists for a specific 'police personality' they do argue that certain individuals are attracted to police work, and certain characteristics appertaining to these individuals are apparent. Clucas (in: Colman & Gorman, 1982) found a sample of officers from an English force to be extroverted, tough-minded and conservative (ie, steadfast, resistant to change, with a preference for safe, traditional, and conventional behaviour). These are not the attributes of individuals who will engage well in a partnership process.

Also there is strong evidence that the police as an organisation are enforcement rather than prevention led. Indeed Billingsley (1992) has questioned whether a partnership approach to community safety is a feasible strategy.

The difficulties do not only lie in the hands of the police. Although there is considerable advice on how to structure partnerships, any introductory text on psychology will show that 'group dynamics' ultimately deliver or disrupt the process. In community safety initiatives these dynamics are magnified as partners come to the table from different backgrounds, with different perspectives and

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different priorities. Inevitably formality, hierarchy, the role of co-ordinator, trust and accountability become important. Crawford & Jones (1995) reported that there was an avoidance of overt conflict in such groups resulting in multiple aims often being accommodated so as not to exclude any partner; a practice that served to dilute and confuse. Other dynamics have resulted in 'group think' or the 'risky shift' phenomena, where outlandish decisions have been made to protect the status of group members.

Faced with this understanding, the purpose of this study was to initially identify the areas on which partnership initiatives, within the Lancashire police area, were failing and then to look for operational interventions that could improve effectiveness.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology took place in two parts. Stage 1 looked at setting a benchmark for the success rate of existing 'problem solving' initiatives. To do this a matrix was devised in which initiatives were

analysed across the use of particular partners and the use of good practice. Stage 2 looked at interventions to increase the success of later initiatives.

STAGE 1: SETTING A BENCHMARK

Listing potential partners

At the time of this study no specific advice on potential partners could be found. As such, focus groups of practitioners were used to generate the groups below:

Potential partners

1. Specialist police departments.
2. Criminal Justice System (preventative legislation, CPS, magistrates' courts, probation, prisons, trading standards, Customs & Excise).
3. Drugs & Alcohol (drug action teams, licensing justices, local authorities, breweries, licensed victuallers, door staff firms).
4. Youth and community services.
5. Education services.
6. Housing groups.
7. Elected members of the community.
8. Local Council services.
9. County Council services.
10. Health services.
11. Victim groups.
12. Help associations.

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13. Local business.
14. Voluntary sector.
15. Minority group representatives.
16. Fire service.

Setting out the good practice that makes effective partnerships

A literature review was conducted to list the good practice articulated by Crime Concern (1998), HMIC (1998) and the Audit Commission (1999). These were:

1. **Community focused:** initiatives which were locally based, often had local commitment and enjoyed the most success.
2. **Theory based:** those initiatives found to be based on crime prevention theory had the most chance of success.
3. **Specific purpose:** it was important that the initiative had clear objectives prior to it starting.
4. **Innovative:** those initiatives that were creative showed more chance of success.
5. **Evaluation criteria:** those initiatives that, prior to implementation, explained how success would be judged had the greatest chance of success.
6. **Evaluation:** many initiatives were not evaluated after implementation, therefore lessons could not be learnt and success could not be judged.
7. **Sufficient resources:** obviously if the initiative

required a set level of resource, then it stood little chance if those resources were not provided.

8. **Exit:** having an exit strategy, prior to embarking upon the initiative was seen as important.

The following variables were also added:

9. **Sustainable:** a high level injection of short-term resources could make an immediate impact, however this was not the aim of 'problem solving' initiatives which attempted to provide a more long-term affect after resources had been withdrawn.

10. **Police intensive:** not mentioned in the literature was the level of police effort that went into the initiative when compared with other partners.

11. **Implementation:** if the initiative was not implemented according to the plan then it had little chance of success.

Analysing the partnership initiatives

All police-led community safety partnership initiatives for a 12-month period, across 3 district council areas ($N=46$), were analysed for the presence or absence of the variables mentioned above. This analysis found the following:

- Although 33% of the initiatives were successful, this meant 67% of initiatives did not result in sustainable reductions of crime/disorder. This equates to a considerable amount of wasted implementation effort and resource.
- Many potential partners such as the county council, health authorities, victim groups, help groups and minority groups were poorly utilised. It appeared that those partners closest to the problem were the ones most likely to be used (ie, local authority, schools and local businesses).
- Sustainability was positively correlated with those initiatives that were: innovative, properly resourced, had clear objectives, evaluation criteria, were theory based and had an exit strategy. This endorsed the findings of HMIC, Crime Concern and the Audit Commission.
- Sustainability was negatively correlated with partnerships that were intensive in the use of police resources.

STAGE 2: INTERVENTIONS TO INCREASE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PARTNERSHIP

As a result of the Stage 1 findings, two operational changes were implemented.

The first was a software solution. Rather than submitting a written

report, the officer submitted the initiative utilising a computerised program that prompted the officer to follow a systematic approach that encompassed good practice.

Second, prior to implementation, the officer was asked to submit an outline plan, which included a summary of the objectives, tactics and potential partners. This was quality assured by a 'problem-solving' co-ordinator for the area the officer worked. This co-ordinator checked the initiative had been thought through and that no other initiative was being planned to tackle the same problem. The co-ordinator also confirmed that the officer had utilised the findings of the 'problem-solving' good practice database. It was felt these interventions would determine that the initiatives were systematically thought through and good practice implemented.

RESULTS

All 'problem-solving' partnership initiatives implemented in the Lancashire Constabulary area (2 unitary and 12 district council areas), over a 4-month period during 2002 were evaluated using the methodology outlined earlier. In this way these results would be measured against the 2001 benchmark.

It was found that far fewer initiatives were being submitted under the new process. Only 21

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initiatives had been reported within the Constabulary area, compared to an estimated 60 during the same period the previous year.

Performance had improved when further comparing the two years. For instance: initiatives which were community focused – 95% (previously 70%); clear objectives – 100% (previously 72%); based on crime prevention theory – 80% (previously 59%); evaluation criteria – 95% (previously 95%); sufficiently resourced – 90% (previously 59%); exit strategy – 60% (previously 46%); and evaluated after the initiative was completed – 100% (previously 54%). Similarly less welcomed activity had been reduced: intensive level of police resources was now seen in only 30% of initiatives (previously 41%); initiatives which were not implemented according to the plan 0% (previously 11%). Not surprisingly this increased level of good practice was found to correlate with success. The evaluation showed that 80% of the initiatives had reported a sustainable solution to the problems (quantifiable reduction in crime &

disorder after police resources had been withdrawn) compared with a previous finding of 33%.

One area, which did not find much improvement, was the diverse use of partners. It appears there exists a small nucleus of partners who are used on a recurring basis. Although there was an increase in the frequency of youth, local authority, county council, housing and education services being used there also appeared a reduction in the use of drug/alcohol, business sector and elected members. Partners outside these areas were rarely used. Also it appeared that when high levels of police resources were used on the initiative it did little to ensure a sustainable success.

The results show the interventions provide a number of benefits. First the quality assurance checks within the system reduce the level of poorly thought through initiatives being implemented. Second that because the good practice guide must be addressed prior to implementation there is a much higher chance of the initiative leading to a sustainable solution to the problem. It appeared that the initiatives had reduced in quantity but had increased significantly in quality. As a result, significant financial and opportunity cost savings were made.

partnership

DISCUSSION

Although since the onset of the 1988 Crime & Disorder Act partnership activity has taken significant strides forward, it is widely accepted that to realise community and government expectation, partners will be required to raise their game. This study has shown that 'problem solving' initiatives, which involve partners coming together to remove the conditions that sustain crime and disorder, are simple in theory but difficult in practice.

Many of the variables that generate 'implementation failure' are both fundamental and longstanding. Evidence showing police ineffectiveness in taking a systematic approach to 'problem solving' as well as evaluating subsequent activity remains a longstanding criticism (Morgan, 1991; Crawford, 1998). The cultural reasons are complex and have been briefly explained earlier, but in essence the police exist as a dependable 24-hour emergency service to deal with society's constantly-evolving problems. These problems are immediate and visible – as such they require immediate and decisive (if short-term) solutions. The resulting, predominantly enforcement-led approach has often been supported by government-led performance indicators that have looked to increase efficiency in terms of

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outputs rather than outcomes. Response times for calls and incidents are a prime example of the police being monitored in terms of their speed to answer, rather than their effectiveness of dealing with the caller. 'Problem-solving' requires police forces to change their paradigm, a requirement that has proved problematic across the developed world.

This study also highlighted issues relating to how the police engage with partners. Even if the commitment and enthusiasm is present it is not always appropriate for the police to lead the initiative in terms of direction or resources. An insistence to lead when they are not the agency associated most closely with the issue may confuse responsibility and accountability. Similarly it is also apparent that partners can be engaged more effectively, as in this local study many potentially useful partners were not used, and more worryingly some partners were negatively correlated with

successful outcomes.

The study however provided an ultimately positive message. With so much responsibility resting on partnership 'problem-solving' it is critical that implementation blockages are highlighted and removed. This study has shown how, by changing operational processes, police practitioners can be assisted in adhering to processes to which they would not naturally conform because of cultural pressures. This led to an improved level of performance for less resource. Whereas the future may bring a new partnership model that will assist with the difficult issues of leadership and compliance at present, these issues remain prominent. Leaders within the police and other agencies should not underestimate the implementation difficulties that remain.

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