

Policing in the 21st Century: What Works and What Doesn't

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**POLICING IN THE 21ST CENTURY:
WHAT WORKS AND WHAT DOESN'T**

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Introductory Comments

Let me begin by saying how honoured I am to be speaking at this 4th National Outlook Symposium. The specific goal of my presentation today is to highlight what I consider to be current issues and dilemmas with the state of policing in Australia. I will use two broad themes to guide my comments:

First, I will identify, what I would consider, to be four major deficits of policing in Australia.

Second, I will identify several policing strategies that hold some promise for policing Australian communities into the 21st century.

Four Deficits of Policing in Australia

In my view, current leaders of policing in Australia need to directly address four basic deficits. These deficits include:

1. An unhealthy social distance between the police and the communities that they serve;
2. The reluctance of many police to directly and effectively deal with quality of life concerns as a priority issue;
3. The ongoing emphasis on traditional, reactive policing tactics; and
4. The lack of adequate information technologies to support pro-active, preventative policing.

I will talk about these four deficits in turn.

The first deficit that hampers policing in Australia is an ongoing and unhealthy social distance between the police and some of the communities that they serve. The police in Australia seem unable to bridge the gap with youth, migrant and indigenous communities in particular. In the new age economy, where residents are the clients and where police are increasingly held more accountable, we *need* the police to break down some of the barriers between them and the communities that they serve. In addition, we expect that the police will work hard to identify operational tactics that will reduce the high levels of crime, victimisation, and client dissatisfaction among youth, migrant and indigenous people.

The second and closely related deficit of policing is an outdated attitude that quality of life concerns are not the types of problems that the police should focus on. Many police, to this day, consider quality of life calls for service as “soft” policing, annoying dispatches, or, in one police officer’s words: “bullshit calls.” Quality of life calls include a whole array of minor complaints such as kids skateboarding, neighbourhood disturbances, loud radios, barking dogs, drunks in the street, people throwing bottles, and all those run-of-the-mill calls for police service that don’t generally involve a CRIME.

Police HATE going to these calls: they want to minimise their time spent responding to these types of calls, they often have a poor attitude when they turn up to respond to these calls, and they see these so-called rubbish calls as wasting their time and taking them away from dealing with the “real thing:” that is crimes such as rape, auto theft, break and enter, robbery, and assault.

This police attitude toward Quality of Life calls is a problem for several reasons:

First: Most people in the community have very little contact with the police. For many people, their only contact with the police is over minor issues, many of which get lumped into the catch-all category of “disturbances.” Police impatience with quality of life concerns sends a message to

residents that they don't care about neighbourhood problems. By contrast, carefully solving these "disturbance" or quality of life concerns fosters trust in the community and reinforces the legitimacy of police presence in local communities. This process of dealing with quality of life concerns is a fundamental first step towards creating a climate of good police-community relations.

Second: Since the mid 1980s in the US, policy makers, researchers and police chiefs advocated the virtues of police efforts to maintain order and focus on quality of life concerns. This philosophy of policing is variously referred to as "fixing broken windows," "order maintenance" or policing disorderly behaviour and incivilities.

The latest research shows that police efforts to build community cohesion through policing quality of life problems can INDIRECTLY lead to reductions in serious crime problems. At the very least, research suggests that police efforts to solve ongoing, low-level quality of life problems is not a waste of time.

Finally, research shows that vast amounts of police time is spent responding to low-level, quality of life concerns. In any eight hour shift, the police might spend up to half of their time responding to what they would consider "rubbish" calls. Many of these calls are for ongoing problems. The police complain about the type of calls that they are dispatched to; they also complain about the amount of time that they spend on these calls. Citizens are not happy because the police never seem to DO anything about SOLVING the problem. Research has shown, however, that there are, in fact, some strategic and technological solutions to this very unhappy state of affairs.

In a nutshell, the answer to this "lack of time" complaint is to use technological, organisational, and strategic solutions to solve these low-level problems and reduce the amount of time responding to these calls. I'll talk more about these solutions later in my presentation.

The third deficit of policing in Australia comes from an outdated loyalty to traditional, reactive police strategies. For example, rapid response, as a police strategy, rests on the assumption that the shorter the police travel time from dispatch to arrival, the less crime there will be. "Rapid response" has formed the backbone of police policies, budgets and organisational structures for many many years. Rapid response policies have justified hiring more police officers, purchasing more cars and upgrading police technologies.

The problem is this: research shows that reducing response times will NOT increase the probability of arrest and it certainly will NOT reduce the crime problem. Indeed, research in the US has found that cutting police travel time from 5 minutes to 2.5 minutes would require a doubling of the police force. BUT, a reduction in response time would have almost NO impact on the odds of making an arrest. Why? Because citizens typically delay reporting crimes.

It doesn't really matter for the vast majority of calls if the police respond within 5 minutes, 20 minutes or even an hour. What matters, however, is that the police reserve rapid response to those very few calls that really require an urgent response, and that call takers clearly explain to citizens when and if they should expect to see an officer at the scene.

Another example of a traditional policing strategy that does not reduce crime is random, preventative patrolling. Random, or preventative, police patrols involve the police driving around their precinct, beat or district in marked police cars. The police are "looking for signs of trouble" and generally driving around waiting for their next dispatched call. The logic of random patrols is this: the more random patrols that an area receives, the more that people think that the police are watching and that the perceived "omnipresence" of the police will deter crime in public places.

The research literature reveals some pretty damning evidence to debunk the wisdom of random patrolling. The bottomline is that there is NO crime control effects of random patrol presence. Random patrols do NOT deter crime and the chances of police discovery of a crime during random patrolling is very remote.

Finally, in my view, the fourth deficit of policing in Australia is a lack of adequate information technology. The federal initiative to introduce CrimTrack is a major step forward. With this initiative, the police will be able to share police information, like DNA, fingerprint records, warrants, and firearm licenses.

But this is not enough. Many state police communications and Computer Aided Dispatch systems are horribly out of date; Similarly, police Management Information Systems are inadequate for policing in the 21st century.

In short, there is a major disjuncture between what a proactive, community-orientated, problem-oriented police department needs from a management information system, and what a ten year old information system, that is designed to support traditional policing practices, can provide. It is not enough to simply upgrade an existing system and make it faster and more efficient. Major surgery to police communications and information systems is required to more effectively triage emergency and non-emergency calls, integrate police and non-police information, and set up communication and records management systems to directly facilitate community and problem-oriented policing.

Transition

So far, I have taken the liberty to illustrate what I consider to be some of the inherent weaknesses of policing in Australia. I will now spend the remainder of my time talking about some contemporary policing strategies that show some promise for the future.

Promising Strategy Number One: Directed Patrols

Just a few minutes ago I made the point that random, preventative patrolling is not a particularly good use of scarce police resources. That is not to say, however, that all types of patrol activity are a complete waste of time and money. Indeed, research shows that crime can be reduced when police patrol presence is systematically concentrated in crime hot spots at hot times. Two major findings from the research literature is important to report here:

First, research from the United States shows that a doubling of patrol presence in crime hotspots, can reduce drug activity, vandalism, solicitation for prostitution and assault by up to 25 percent. This does not mean doubling the number of police officers, but rather using existing resources and diverting them strategically to hot places at hot times.

Second, research shows that a 15 minute stop at a crime hotspot appears to be the optimal length of time that the police need to visit a hot spot for the purpose of deterring crime. This means that simply driving through a hotspot is a waste of time. Conversely, sitting in a patrol car for an hour at a hotspot is also a waste of time. Alternatively, what the police need to do is clearly identify a hotspot; know the rhythms of illicit activity at that hotspot; and then spend at least 15 minutes at strategic times making their presence very clear.

These research results have major ramifications for police policy makers: first, Police Commanders desperately need up-to-date and accurate information to pinpoint hotspots, tabulate data, and identify crime patterns. This obviously requires access to decent information technologies, basic analytic skills, and crime mapping software. Second, Police Commanders need to USE this information to strategically direct their patrol units to hot places at hot times. To do this, police commanders need flexibility in their staff levels and a wide range of staff allocation options.

Promising Strategy Number Two: Problem-Oriented Policing

While directed patrolling makes a lot of sense, we also know that it is not really enough just to send patrol officers to hotspots and expect long term changes in the dynamics that created the crime problem in the first place. Problem-oriented policing represents a worthwhile strategy that fills this void.

Problem-oriented policing – or POP for short-- is an operational approach that encompasses four very distinct steps. Police problem-solvers seek to systematically identify crime problems, analyse the factors contributing to the problems, develop appropriate responses to directly eliminate or reduce the magnitude of the problems, and then assess the effectiveness of the strategies. The POP approach is characterised by police officers taking responsibility for developing and implementing a range of highly specific and tailor-made solutions. Effective problem-solving officers are the managers of solving crime problems; they go beyond simply reacting to problem places or situations and they attempt to solve a broad spectrum of crime and disorder issues at problem places.

Controlled experimentation, post-facto evaluations and research have all suggested that POP is an effective strategy in reducing drug market activity, break and enter, gun crimes and disorderly behaviour.

While POP is a very promising strategy, we know that police departments need to overcome several barriers to effectively implement problem-oriented policing.

First: The police need to improve their information systems to generate data that is useful for POP efforts. At the very least, police need easy access to their calls for service, arrests, incident and field interview data. Police also need access to socio-demographic data, land parcel data, and other non-police data that might help them to identify and analyse ongoing crime problems.

Second: The organisational structures of most police agencies are not POP-friendly. The inflexibility of shift rotations, the high staff turnover on short-term assignments, and the institutional constraints that make it difficult for patrol officers to free themselves from being slaves to the emergency call system represent three organisational characteristics that impede effective implementation of POP.

Third: Effective implementation of POP requires officers to MANAGE crime problems. By “manage” problems, I do not mean that they go out and act as if they are social workers. Effective problem-solvers are those officers who can work with a broad range of people to identify, analyse and solve local problems. This requires officers to think laterally and implement responses that are outside of the regular tool box of police tactics. Recruiting future POP officers who have good managerial and communication skills will greatly enhance the chances of POP being successfully implemented in police agencies throughout Australia.

Promising Strategy Number Three: Third party policing

Closely related to problem-oriented policing is the concept of third party policing. Third party policing refers to a whole genre of police tactics whereby the police engage or coerce the help of “third parties” to take crime control or crime prevention responsibility. In third party policing, the police control crime through various third parties including parents, business owners, school teachers, landlords, insurance companies, parking lot supervisors, apartment block security guards, grounds maintenance staff and shop assistants.

The police draw on a variety of non-criminal statutes to elicit the cooperation from third parties. Civil remedies such as drug nuisance abatement, local town by-laws, building, health and fire codes can all be used within a third party policing context to solve local crime problems.

Police ability to build partnerships and gain cooperation from a wide variety of people is the key feature of successful third party policing. From my research in the United States, I found that for the vast majority of problems, the police were able to encourage and work in harmony with third parties to take some crime control responsibility. The police resorted to legal action to coerce third party cooperation in less than 5 percent of cases.

Promising Strategy Number Four: Performance Outcome Reviews

The final strategy that, in my view, holds some promise for the future of policing in Australia is police management practices that hold districts, precincts, or beats accountable for reducing their local crime problems. The South Australia Police Department, for example, calls this management process “Performance Outcome Reviews.”

In the United States, this crime accountability system is referred to as COMPSTAT. I hasten to add that the Aussie version of COMPSTAT is a far cry from the commander-bashing processes set up in the early 1990s by Commissioner Bill Bratton in New York City. By contrast, the Performance Outcome Review process in South Australia provides an ideal management structure to implement problem-oriented policing, hotspots policing and third party policing.

As with these proactive crime control tactics, Performance Outcome Reviews are heavily dependent on access to accurate and up-to-date information and they rely upon local commander autonomy and flexibility to reduce local problems.

Concluding Comments

To conclude my presentation today, I want to leave with you with two general thoughts:

First, contemporary crime control tactics are seriously under-researched in Australia. We need to know more about problem-oriented policing in the Australian context, we need to know whether third party policing is a viable tactic in Australia, and we need to know the impact of implementing Performance Outcome Reviews on local crime rates.

Second, politicians, policy makers, and the police need to invest in basic police infrastructures, particularly around information technologies and organisational reform, to achieve success in reducing and preventing crimes into the 21st century. I am not suggesting that the police need MORE resources to do more of the same. Rather, resources are needed to change the basic infrastructure of information technology systems and organisational structures to make them complementary to community policing, problem-oriented policing, third party policing and for the implementation of Performance Outcome Reviews.

We know a lot about what the police used to do last century and what does not work. But we also know quite a bit about the types of police strategies that hold some promise. The goal for Australian policing should be to invest in the implementation and evaluation of those promising police innovations that will make Australian communities safer places to live.