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## **The police and partnership working**

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## **The Police and Partnership Working: Reflections on Recent Research**

**McCarthy, D, O'Neill, M**

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*This paper reflects on the findings of two independent studies carried out by the authors into partnership working between the police and other community agencies. Running counter to previous evidence, we find strong support for partnership working amongst police officers both at operational and strategic levels. This paper draws out some of the effective ingredients of successful partnership working and the ways it can be best embraced and sustained within the police organisation.*

### **Introduction**

It is now some 16 years since the introduction of the Crime and Disorder Act (1998) – an act which formally established partnership working between the police and other community agencies in England and Wales. Partnership working is now an institutionalized part of everyday police work in delivering a range of community services and responses. Partnership working in policing does however have a rather more contemptuous history. Early studies conducted during the mid-late 1980s in which partnership working was being rolled out by the Home Office across a range of crime control projects (Blagg et al 1988, Liddle and Gelsthorpe, 1994) identified a host of problems with the reception of this method within the police organisation. Amongst these were partnership-based projects often being short-term, with limited funding, as well as operating within a fairly narrow set of issues associated principally with target hardening and work with the business sector (Tilley, 2002). James Morgan's (1991) report which was to become a key driver for much of the visions of partnership working contained in the Crime and Disorder Act (1991) was key in its message that tackling crime and its causes should no longer be the core responsibility of the police. Although recognising local differences and variations across areas in England and Wales, one of the tensions surrounding the implementation of partnership models was the distinct challenge this created for the police organisation. Pearson et al (1992) identified difficulties for police officers moving beyond task-orientation, towards a more deliberative and cooperative set of practices typical of partnership responses. In turn, hostility towards more welfare-orientated agencies, frequent inter-agency conflicts, as well as struggles for the police in relinquishing some of their authority and control all presented problems in the early introduction of partnership working (Sampson et al, 1988, Pearson, 1992). Crawford and Jones (1995) further argue that tensions between agencies were seldom dealt with in a direct and constructive manner leading to an outcome where 'conflict is often defined away, avoided, or circumvented' (ibid: 24). This can lead to decisions being made outside of formal meetings in ways which can be divisive and exclusive, resulting in certain agencies interests being ignored.

Since these studies were conducted, many changes have occurred within the police organisation which has altered some of the ways through which partnership is understood and implemented. Although we do not deny that not all of the above problems have disappeared, we do however take issue with the claim that the police possess contemptuous attitudes to partnership working. Firstly, policing has undoubtedly become more complex, with a significant

range of tasks and functions conducted by the police which transcend responses to crime and law enforcement and require close collaboration. Examples include responses to disaster planning and conflict management (Punch and Markham, 2000), youth crime prevention and early intervention working (McCarthy, 2011, 2014), and reassurance and community building activities (Johnston, 2005). Secondly, with the rise of the Neighbourhood Policing agenda, greater focus has been placed on problem solving in communities where the police commonly work with housing agencies, schools, children's service departments, youth services (to name a few examples), in order to reduce issues of crime and antisocial behaviour, as well as addressing the underlying causes of these problems. Thirdly, given the length of time by which partnership working has been institutionalised into the police organisation, such policies no longer have the same introductory flavour and have had sufficient time to be accepted. Recent policies from the police and Home Office clearly illustrate the importance of partnership working for a contemporary police service (Home Office, 2010, HMIC, 2012, May, 2012), even within a context of budget reductions.

This paper is comprised of an assessment of two independent studies into the police and partnership working. Study 1 was conducted by McCarthy (2014) into partnership working between the police and community agencies in responding to low-level antisocial behaviour. This study focused primarily on early intervention and preventive roles of the police in working with children and families to deal with both crime and its background factors, such as education, employment, drug and alcohol consumption, and mental health issues. The study was conducted in two police force areas in the South of England and consisted of a two-year observation from 2006 to 2008 of multi-agency case conference panels, as well as interviews with 18 professionals involved in these fora. These included six police officers (five female, one male), three social workers (two female, one male), one drugs worker (female), three youth offending officers (two female, one male), three housing officers/community wardens (two male, one female) and two local authority officers (males). Study 2 was conducted by O'Neill (see O'Neill and McCarthy, 2013; O'Neill and Loftus, 2013) into partnership working and Neighbourhood Policing. 25 police officers were interviewed in an in-depth semi-structured format, ranging in rank from constable up to Superintendent, the majority of whom (although not all) were directly involved in partnership working. Six of the interviewees were women. The officers were recruited from four police forces in England; two largely urban and two largely rural. Interviews took place between October 2008 and March 2009. Both studies follow similar research designs as previous studies of partnership working, which have tended to consist of a combination of qualitative interviews with practitioners and observation of inter-agency meetings (e.g. Sampson et al, 1988, Pearson et al, 1992, Crawford and Jones, 1995).

Data for the two studies were collected at a time just prior to the austerity cuts to policing and other front-line public services were in the very early stages. Although we regard many of the findings of our studies to have more general resonance and applicability to understanding the practical delivery of partnership working, we do acknowledge a need for re-evaluating partnership relations post-austerity – at a time after cuts have been implemented into organisational and operational structures within the police. We follow up on this point at the end of the article.

Within our two studies we find that the police did support and embrace partnership working, both at operational and strategic officer levels. During the following sections we identify several reasons as to why officers provided such support for partnership working and highlight examples of ways to improve and sustain good partnership relationships within the police organisation. We

then conclude by assessing some of the current austerity cuts within the police and their possible impact on the future of partnership working.

### **Factors behind police support for partnership working**

In our two studies, the majority of reasons which police officers gave for their support for partnership working were outcome-based. Through the amalgamation of information shared between agencies and the pooling of resources to tackle certain issues, the belief among officers is that underlying social problems or causes of offending can be more effectively tackled. Here officers also recognized the limits of their own expertise in dealing with certain social problems, citing the work of other agencies such as youth and children's services as more effective in understanding the complexities of issues such as family situations and child delinquency. A further motivation behind these responses was the pragmatic emphasis on cost savings. Officers cited the benefits of joined-up working in which different agencies would contribute resources to develop projects directed at particular community problems. For instance, in one field locale (Study 1), the police were responsible for organising a series of football tournaments during the summer months to help divert young people from several large housing estates from crime and antisocial behaviour, which officers funding the scheme regarded as a cheap preventive option, as well as an activity with clear societal benefits for young people.

Our findings challenge some of the interpretations made by other academics (Blagg et al, 1988; Sampson et al., 1988; Pearson et al, 1992, Crawford and Jones, 1995) about the police's difficulties in relinquishing their control over matters involving crime and disorder during partnership working. Although we do not deny that for the most part the police continue to dominate partnership working in terms of structuring the core agendas, deploying resources and having administrative support to organise these approaches, we do identify some important factors regarding the police's willingness to acquiesce to a social service mandate:

*I think we realised as the police that we can't solve all the problems ourselves. You can't deal with one set of issues, whether an adult or child, if you're not actually dealing with the other issues which they've got as well. So if they are an addict of heroin and alcohol and committing offences then there is no point just dealing with the alcohol issues because they will still commit offences because they are still on drugs. I know that's probably a very simplistic way of looking at it, but it became very clear that there's no point at looking at just one of the issues the persons got, we have to look at all of them.*[Interview with Vicky, Police sergeant – Study 1]

Past studies have indicated that some of these responses from the police may be conditioned by a 'passing the buck' of responsibility where 'crime' rather than 'social' problems are deemed the core responsibility of the police (Crawford, 1997, Edwards and Benyon, 2000). Although we do not refute instances where officers may respond in such ways, changes within the police as a response to Neighbourhood Policing have conditioned officers to embrace a closer orientation towards 'soft' policing which transcends a focus on tackling crime and disorder (McCarthy, 2013, 2014). In certain areas where there are lower levels of trust between the police and sections of the community, the police relinquishing some of their control and leadership may also have important practical necessities in attempting to achieve more effective, 'non police-led', resolutions.

Related to the above was the strong cultural orientation of the police towards pragmatic working styles. One of the core challenges for the police in embracing partnership working was their organisational structure and cultural belief systems. For example, the police hierarchical and command-control structure can lend itself to a style of working which favours task-based response, as opposed to deliberation and debate. The latter is more commonly attributed to partnership working and tensions have been highlighted where officers struggle to adapt to such a culture. Arguably one of the biggest facilitators of partnership working within the police occurred when officers experienced the benefits of its practical operations and outcomes, and then promoted these experiences to colleagues. This is summed up by one of the police officers in the research:

*We had some good wins . . . it's about selling, about being a salesperson and having a product that is good behind you. It's like if you are selling a car. You could be as confident as anything but if that car is absolutely pants [slang for low quality] people may try it but they'll bring it back. Whereas if you sell that car and it's fantastic then people will keep coming back for it. It's about having things that work so they can rely on [them]. The first time you try it, if it doesn't work then you can guarantee that they won't try it again. [Interview with Kate, Police Sergeant – study 1]*

The sentiments of the officer above who was charged with ensuring that partnership working within Neighbourhood Policing teams was being adopted effectively, as well as within other departments within the police, expresses the importance of 'selling partnership right' to officers. Our research finds that given the previously identified core value base of pragmatism as a key part of police culture (e.g. Crank, 1997, Reiner, 2010), successful adoptions of partnership within the police rely heavily on fellow officers celebrating their experiences of partnership working in ways which emphasise the practical benefits to their everyday work. Reiner has eloquently described pragmatism within the context of resistance to change in which 'police officers are concerned with getting from here to tomorrow (or the next hour) safely and with the least fuss and paperwork, which has made them reluctant to contemplate innovation, experimentation, or research' (Reiner: 2010:132). Instead, we find that officers highlight the benefits of partnership precisely because it makes aspects of their police work more effective in the long-term, even if it does require some extra effort or alteration to working practices in the short-term.

### **What makes for successful partnerships?**

The main focus in this section is to highlight inter-personal issues involved in partnership working. Although our respective studies were not designed to assess outcome-measures of partnership working, such impact on crime reduction, we do draw parallels with evaluation-based studies of specific partnership projects (e.g. Berry et al, 2011). These applications are designed to provide understanding of the mechanisms behind effective partnership working, and how these may be channeled to produce specific benefits with respect to crime reduction, community safety, and community engagement. The key findings from our studies are broken down into the following themes: trust; style, identity and operation, and managing diversity.

#### ***Trust***

Trust plays a key role in the establishment of sustainable ties with fellow professionals within partnership contexts. A key feature of trust relations according to the officers interviewed was the consistency of agency representation. This was raised as crucial in allowing time for understanding each agency's motives and goals behind their engagement in partnership working. In turn, frequent involvement in partnership working also brings with it a need to understand other occupational cultures and the art of tact and cooperation, as well as having respect and understanding for agencies with a welfare orientation. The police can be treated with suspicion by other agencies as well, especially given their law enforcement powers which can be perceived as a barrier when engaging in certain types of partnership work. As such, having a stable set of representatives from each agency, who have time to earn the trust of one another, is vital:

*It's nice from my perspective to be able to email X over there and say 'look we have had a complaint about whatever on this particular street, and this guy wants to know about what council's involvement are in it and can you just give them him a bell', and she will give him a ring and then she will email me back saying 'right, we have arranged to do this from our perspective, what's your next move'. But it certainly works for anti-social behaviour...if we are doing something in particular we will ring X the anti-social behaviour co-ordinator over there, and just say 'we are out on Friday night, come out with us', and nine times out of 10 she will do. (Interview 7C, police constable – Study 2)*

Having a stable set of representatives, as well as prior experience of partnership working, was identified in Berry et al's (2011) Home Office review of partnership working as associated with successful project outcomes. This can be crucial where specific expertise is required of partner representatives, as well as them needing a working knowledge of the practical delivery of partnership strategies in order to ensure effective and sustainable responses.

As well as the stability of representation, a further challenge with partnership working is the lack of knowledge, and occasional misinformation, about the roles and responsibilities of agencies in partnership networks. In two of the field sites where this research was conducted, police probationers/recruits spent time with other community agencies as a way of learning more about the work conducted by partners. This was established with agreement from the heads of the respective agencies (including the local authority, children's services and the youth offending team) as a way of improving the understanding of police officers about the various roles and responsibilities conducted by other professionals in the area. Formal partnerships also involved some time being devoted to getting to know more about the specific functions and duties carried out by partner agencies. This often took place informally before meetings in the form of a chat and cup of coffee. In other situations the process was supported through a workshop activity which addressed these issues in a more structured environment. These types of engagement can help improve the level of understanding from agency representatives about the overall goals and functions of partnership mechanisms, and help focus each agency to its key contributions towards responding to issues of crime and disorder.

According to officers interviewed, partnership was embraced as an effective way of getting things done *through its informality*, where officers could contact a named individual from another agency without the need to go through other channels which can often take considerable time and effort:

*[...] 'the police will lock the person up and the youth offending team appear to let them out again, but it's only when get into what they actually do with them, that you appreciate the amount of work that goes into it [...] But that's also changed the view of the YOT (Youth Offending Team) towards other police officers as well [...] and it's built that trust up, particularly neighbourhood policing teams coming into force as well because we would also involve the community beat managers in meetings as well so they got to see and understand what's being done around the young person [...] and they appreciated that, but they also appreciated that the YOT weren't the soft pastel coloured agency that we seemed to be' [...]. (Interview 3C, police sergeant – Study 2)*

Many aspects of police work involve similar kinds of informal enquiries, where communication with informants and other persons can be a key part of investigative work (Innes, 2003). In this sense, the same practices identified within partnership working can overlap with more familiar methods employed by officers, thereby adding to the pragmatic value of collaboration. Frequent communication and contact with partner agents can also moderate many of the more traditional police-centric values and beliefs which have been identified elsewhere as barriers to partnership and other community collaborations (see Paoline, 2003 for discussions). Given that successful partnership working involves some trade-off between agency agendas as well as compromise regarding various courses of action, police officers who have adopted more genuine and effective partnership roles tend, for the most part, to show sufficient tact and respect for the wishes and intentions of other agency staff. The informality of partnership working comprising of effective information exchange between agencies, including the pooling of effective intelligence and data can be crucial to the operational outcomes of partnership working. These have been tied to the effectiveness of partnership projects, including projects reducing domestic abuse (Whetsone, 2001) and violent crime (Winterfield et al, 2006) where information shared between partner agencies had a key role in crime reduction.

### ***Style, Identity and Operation***

One common frustration which can be voiced by police officers is that partnership meetings can be nothing more than 'talking shops' (Pearson et al, 1992: 50) which are absent of specific tasks or have limited accountability for ensuring partners deliver these. As previously mentioned, police officers are socialised into a distinct set of cultural values associated with command-control and hierarchical leadership (see Reiner, 2010 for reviews). By contrast, partnership relations are often based more on deliberation, discussion and some degree of compromise regarding various courses of action. Police officers new to partnership working can struggle to adapt to this process. There are often no quick fixes to this, with assimilation into the cultures of partnership working taking time. The styles and operations of partnership working tend to see the police dominate proceedings. Although this can be seen as a negative aspect of partnership working with phrases such as 'police led' often invoked to describe such arrangements, there are often more practical reasons for these structures. The police are doubtless *the* biggest partner agency with more resources at their disposal, often with greater numbers of officers attending partnership meetings, as well as the agency with the clearest mandate when it comes to responding to crime and disorder. Innes and Weston (2010) have also identified that the public tend to see anti-social behavior as a police and not a partnership matter. This lends some support for responses being 'police-led' in terms of public perceptions, although this may encounter

limitations in terms of examining community problems from different perspectives in order to bring about more robust and long-term problem solving resolutions.

The police have a duty to ensure that their overt styles of governing are delivered sensibly in ways which bring together, rather than alienate fellow partner agencies. There is evidence that the remit of partnership in approaching issues of crime and disorder from a broader range of perspectives does encourage some compromise from the police:

*I must admit that the police have historically taken the lead on things perhaps other organisations should have taken a lead, but I think that's changing. I think the reason why it's always been that is that crime and disorder has always been a police issue that's led by the police, and a number of key partners have had to understand their roles and responsibilities a lot clearer given that things have changed and the onus of responsibility has changed over time. (Interview 1A, Sergeant – Study 2)*

This compromise which the police must attempt to balance within partnership working relations has been facilitated by principles of Neighbourhood Policing. In particular, the focus on local problem solving, sharing information with partner agencies, and in some cases, developing shared offices which accommodate local police, community wardens, and other community workers. In a practical sense, these kinds of physical sites of partnership working can be extremely positive in forging consistent methods of 'doing partnership', such as has been expressed in youth crime and restorative justice interventions where the physical presence of different agency professionals improved the resolution of cases and helped deliver more effective outcomes in terms of crime reduction (Turner et al, 2002). Elsewhere in our data, compromise was conceived by officers as being improved over time from the early beginnings of partnership working, especially where officers became more acquainted and trusting of the intentions and functions of fellow partner agencies – a theme discussed in the previous section.

### ***Managing Diversity in Police Partnerships***

A number of early studies into partnership working identified that the characteristics of officers involved are non-representative of the organisation, with a higher proportion of female officers in particular (Sampson et al, 1991, Pearson et al, 1992, Crawford and Jones, 1995). One explanation for this made by Pearson et al (1992) was the assumption within the police that female officers were better suited to partnership working due to the types of policing tasks being arguably more about 'soft' policing and community relations, as well as the styles of working requiring greater cooperative skills. Other studies have also noted inequalities which exist in the police organisation with respect to gender, as well as other forms of difference, such as race, ethnicity and sexuality (see Dick, Silvestri and Westmarland, 2013). Here the over-representation of women in partnership working could be interpreted as evidence of their marginality and confinement to 'soft' policing tasks. Although we do not deny this argument, we do however note that the more mainstream use of partnership working across different police departments and specialisms may be breaking down the associations between partnership working and 'soft' forms of policing.

Our research studies find a continued over-representation of female officers within some partnership networks, as well as discovering variations in the ways of *doing* partnership working between male and female officers. These differences which were consistent through the

interviews did not vary in terms of attitudes towards partnership which were supportive regardless of gender of officer. The main variation in terms of gender had to do with the uses and purpose of partnership working within policing where for male officers were formed more closely around crime control and intelligence gathering, compared to encouraging support work and prevention for female officers. These differences were despite similar operational duties conducted by male and female officers within the context of Neighbourhood Policing roles. We highlight that male officers usually framed partnership working as a way of achieving better 'intelligence' to address crime problems:

*I set out the rules early on when I meet people. I will introduce myself, my role, what I do, and am there to work with them to support them, and other partners will do the same. But I will always tell people not to lose sight of the jobs we do. As much as I do all that community stuff, and I hope they see me in that role more than the other, you have to do stuff on the enforcement side. [Interview with Neil, Police Constable – Study 1]*

By contrast, female officers were less likely to use a crime control mentality as a dominant explanation for their working practices, featuring more emphasis on the preventive aspects of partnership in working with children and families involved in crime:

*It was supposed to be a helping process and preventative process and everything else. Everyone bought into that and obviously I think in the first few months we were able to prove that we weren't just setting things up so that we could get as much information as we could so that we could go out and bosh the doors in [laughs]. [Interview with Vicky, Police Sergeant – Study 1]*

That said, although there were different expressions of partnership working, there was less evidence that male and female officers conducted altogether different tasks. We interpret some of these variations as reflections of different cultural values of policing, within which gendered attitudes may be granted more or less acceptability (Miller, 1999). Interestingly police officers also tended to refute any fundamental differences between genders in terms of their attitudes and responses to partnership working (see also Rabe-Hemp, 2009). This denial of difference akin to gender may well be explained by the cultural values of the police where any recognition of difference between officers in terms of characteristics such as race, gender and sexuality is often frowned upon (Chan, 1997). Reflecting on the over-representation of female officers in partnership networks, we also argue that these outcomes should not always be interpreted as a disadvantage for female officers, where in certain situations opportunities for developing specialisms for career advancement and informing practice in other areas of the police organisation may be achieved (e.g. McCarthy, 2013).

### **Partnership as a 'way forward' for the police**

The prospects for partnership working within the context of government cuts to public services may appear to be rather bleak. For the police, there remain significant questions about the delivery of partnership working if officers are further stretched in the range of duties which they must perform. So too may partner agencies suffer similar challenges as they go about restructuring to conduct front-line services with fewer resources. That said, both the Home

Office and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary have both identified important opportunities for partnership working in the context of austerity (Home Office, 2010b; HMIC, 2012). The ability to pool resources and services across agencies may be one such outcome, as has already been achieved in various incarnations of mixed economy policing (Crawford et al, 2005). Alternatively, as Innes and Weston (2010) have argued, there often a paradox of partnership working whereby areas which devolve more responsibility for tackling anti-social behaviour to community agencies tend to have slightly lower levels of public satisfaction for tackling anti-social behaviour (ASB). This is because the public tend to perceive tackling ASB as a police issue and not a partnership one. This theme warrants further attention, and may have further implications in terms of educating the public about partnership working, its methods and effectiveness.

This paper has focused its attention mostly on the processes which can help improve the everyday operations of partnership working, rather than the outcomes of partnerships such as reducing crime and disorder. Following the systematic review conducted by Berry et al (2011), we do however note that all of the themes we have recognised during this paper as crucial to the effectiveness of partnerships, have also been attributed to successful outcomes of partnership projects. These include a host of outcomes including reducing crime among gangs, domestic violence, youth crime, and improving neighbourhood safety (see Berry et al, 2011 for details). We therefore regard this paper as illustrating key mechanisms which can help enhance not only the relationships and mechanisms behind the *doing* of partnership working, but also in terms of tangible case outcomes behind the reduction of crime and improvement of neighbourhood safety.

The two research studies from which this paper has drawn make a number of important practical points about policing partnerships. Firstly, the appeal of partnership working for the police appears to fit into many of its pre-existing value systems – that it is seen as making elements of police work more efficient, that it inspires a pragmatic and ‘joined up’ approach to dealing with crime and disorder, and that its informality provides an effective way of going about policing tasks in ways which improve information flow, contact and communication between officers and fellow community agencies. There are doubtless examples where these aspects do not always operate as smoothly, but overall we do find clear evidence of support for partnership working from within the police organisation. We also highlight some of the ways through which police officers can successfully engage in persuading and aligning fellow officers to adopt partnership working – one of the strongest strategies being to stress the pragmatic (rather than theoretical/conceptual) ‘try it, see that it works’ emphasis – a key value system noted in studies of police culture (see Crank, 1997).

Secondly, as well as adopting a more deliberative and cooperative style of working which may have important benefits for the police and partner agencies, there should also be caution in how to operationalise and manage partnership working outside of formal meetings. Common in many partnership structures is the existence of certain power players or ‘in groups’ of partner representatives who often make the most important strategic decisions outside of formal meetings (see Crawford and Jones, 1995, McCarthy, 2014). This is not always an intended sectarian strategy to alienate fellow agencies, but invariably can lead to these eventualities. As such, there should be some form of communication loop which allows partners to influence or comment on certain decisions, if indeed the outcomes have implications for their working practices, clients or staff.

Thirdly, in supporting partnership working within the police organisation more generally, attempts should be made to socialise new or unfamiliar officers with the values, functions and

outcomes of partnership methods. Officers who have longer experience of partnership working should therefore take time to brief their colleagues about the methods, styles and goals of partnership working, as well as taking fellow officers along to meetings in a shadowing capacity to allow them to learn more about the cultures of operation (a practice employed by officers in study 1). This may be helpful in ensuring that police officers fully understand the working styles and cultures of partnership working, as well as some of the 'soft' skills of communication, cooperation and compromise which are fundamental for building and sustaining partnership relations.

Although our research findings are extensive in covering different geographic areas across England and Wales and finding parallels across these locales, we do not discount local variations in terms of the implementation of partnership practices and working roles which may alter, for good and bad, how partnership working is received and operationalised within the police. Overall we do identify that in many areas partnership working has become a more mainstream approach to a variety of policing tasks which no longer possesses a marginal and contemptuous existence, both within the organisation at large and considering the characteristics of officer involved. Therefore in conclusion, our studies broadly reflect a success story in terms of the police's adoption of partnership working practices – findings which tend to run counter to previous research within policing studies.

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