

Making the ‘Visible’ Visible: The Communicative Properties of a Visible Police Presence in Community Engagement

N8 Policing Research Partnership

SUMMARY

The College of Policing (2018) recently developed *Neighbourhood Policing Guidelines* to provide forces with a practicable framework for delivering local policing. In the guidelines, police visibility, described as ‘officers, staff and volunteers being responsible for and having a targeted visible presence in neighbourhoods’, is identified as an ‘essential element’ of ‘engaging communities.’ This aspect of the guidelines has been indirectly boosted by the government announcing in 2019 a commitment to increasing police funding to put ‘more bobbies on the beat’ (GOV.UK, 2019). These developments, although in their infancy, recast police visibility has an important part of local policing functions, particularly delivering community engagement. It is within this context that the research sought to develop incomplete insights into how police visibility, and more specifically the visible presence of Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs), can contribute to providing an ongoing two-way dialogue between the police and the public and enabling the police to better understand communities, as envisaged in the ‘engaging communities’ guideline.

KEY FINDINGS

- A visible police presence in the day-to-day work of Neighbourhood Policing Teams (NPTs) is created by the interactional accessibility of police officers and staff on patrol. It is the nature and structure of the interactional accessibility of police officers on vehicle patrol and PCSOs on foot patrol that highlights the compatibility of each patrol method to delivering a community engagement function.
- The vehicle is a closed bounded space moving on the road at a distance from others that can restrict and disguise the physical accessibility of police officers. As a result, vehicle patrol can create the conditions for minimal formal police-public contact and can produce information about the activity of officers that is uncondusive to establishing a visible presence to engage communities.
- The open unbounded space of walking on the street in close proximity to others can expose and amplify the physical accessibility of PCSOs. Accordingly, foot patrol can create the conditions for increased informal eye-to-eye and verbal police-public contact capable of facilitating a reciprocal expressive connection and developing relations conducive to establishing a visible presence to engage communities.

Research conducted by Lisa Weston, University of Liverpool

INTRODUCTION

One of the main approaches in Community Policing programmes is police officers being assigned to localities on a long-term basis with regular patrol responsibilities to deliver inter alia community engagement (Fielding, 2005). In the UK, this style of Community Policing has taken shape in the Reassurance Policing and Neighbourhood Policing programmes and has been complemented by the PCSO role; all of which have been designed around strengthening the utility of police visibility in public policing. PCSOs, non-warranted members of police staff, were created as an additional policing resource for delivering highly visible uniformed patrol and engaging with communities (ACPO, 2007). Supporting the maintenance of uniformed patrol in public policing, the Reassurance Policing programme, piloted between 2003 and 2005, centred on a strategy of visible police officers being accessible to and familiar with local people, targeting the problems identified as significant to them and co-producing solutions with them and partner organisations (Innes, 2004).

The three delivery mechanisms formulated in the Reassurance Policing programme – police visibility, community involvement in identifying local priorities and collaborative problem solving with partners and the public – were translated into the Neighbourhood Policing programme to improve the detection and prevention of crime, encourage civility and foster more cohesive communities (Home Office, 2005; Quinton and Morris, 2008). Dedicated Neighbourhood Policing Teams (NPTs) made up of police officers, special constables and PCSOs in every neighbourhood across the country were tasked with ‘providing a visible, reassuring presence, preventing and detecting crime and developing constructive and lasting engagement’ (Home Office, 2004, p.7). However, over time police visibility, and more specifically the PCSO role, has become increasingly threatened by changes in the policing landscape. The ever-increasing demand on service, diminished resources brought about by austerity in 2010 and the changing nature of crime has placed increasing pressure on police forces to adapt on a radical scale (Brown 2014). Within this austere climate of change police visibility has noticeably reduced to the extent that the necessity and cost effectiveness of the PCSO role has been questioned and concerns have been raised about the end of ‘bobbies on the beat’ (Dearden, 2019; Loveday and Smith, 2015).

Acknowledging that the day-to-day activities of Neighbourhood Policing have dramatically altered, the College of Policing (2018) recently developed *Neighbourhood Policing Guidelines* to provide forces with a practicable framework for delivering local policing. Police visibility, as set out on the front page, features as an ‘essential element’ of the ‘engaging communities’ guideline. It is against this backdrop that the following research questions were formulated:

- What is a visible police presence in the day-to-day work of NPTs?
- In what ways does police visibility, particularly PCSO visibility, contribute to community engagement?

METHODOLOGY

To answer the research questions, an ethnographic research method, consisting of non-participant observation and unstructured interviews, was selected to ‘see’ community engagement as perceived and experienced by police officers and staff. Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in an urban constabulary located in the North of England. It comprised 20 observations of 16 Police Constables, 22 PCSOs and 3 Sergeants belonging to 2 NPTs. The NPTs were purposefully chosen based on them potentially offering exposure to different localities where policing priorities and relationships with the communities varied. The fieldwork involved accompanying officers during their routine shifts conducting foot and vehicle patrol across their neighbourhood areas. The observations totalled 150 hours over a period of eight months (July 2017 to February 2018) and covered 15 ‘day’ shifts (0800 until 1600 or 1800) and 5 ‘late’ shifts (1400 or 1500 until 2200 or 0000) with the length of each varying between 5 hours and 10 hours. During the fieldwork I had the opportunity to talk with officers informally about their knowledge and experiences in addition to asking

exploratory questions about their work tasks and interventions. Electronic field notes produced after each observation were thematically analysed using a coding structure based on concepts from Erving Goffman's work on face-to-face interaction.

FINDINGS

The Goffmanian analysis highlighted that a visible police presence in community engagement work is police officers and staff being *interactionally* accessible for direct and indirect forms of contact with the public. The *interactional* accessibility of police officers and staff is structured by the boundedness, proximity and openness of the patrol spaces they occupy. The vehicle is a closed bounded space moving on the road at a distance from others that can restrict and disguise the physical accessibility of police officers. In contrast, the open unbounded space of walking on the street in close proximity to others can expose and amplify the physical accessibility of PCSOs. The variation in the interactional accessibility of vehicle and foot patrol spaces produces different types of police-public contact and conveys different messages about policing activity. Taken together, these differences can be used to highlight the compatibility of each patrol method to delivering a community engagement function. In comparison to vehicle patrol, it is the communicative features of PCSO foot patrol that can be seen to create the conditions for PCSOs to be interactionally accessible for developing a two-way dialogue with the public and a better understanding of the community. PCSOs can utilise eye contact with the public, ranging from glancing to more prolonged visual attention, which among other outcomes, can create an openness for initiating unplanned face encounters with the public. An important part of inviting or receiving face engagements with the public is greeting behaviours involving to different degrees positive expressions of social recognition, such as smiles, and/or physical gestures, for instance waving or nodding, usually accompanied by verbal salutations. These welcoming exchanges can assist PCSOs in communicating good intentions, affording social recognition and approval or providing an opportunity to intervene if something is wrong; all of which can result in them building relations in a civil way with unacquainted persons or maintaining relations in a considerate manner with acquainted persons. Principally, greeting behaviours affirm and support the social relationship between PCSOs and the public and open the lines of communication for dialogue.

The opportunity for and willingness of PCSOs to enter into talk can lead to unplanned face encounters that allow them to demonstrate social closeness and relatedness; provide support and assistance; gather intelligence; or prevent and address low-level crime and disorder; all of which offer information about people and places that builds an understanding of communities. Underpinning all these impromptu contacts in most instances is a degree of social intimacy and sociability that can enable PCSOs to establish or maintain rapport with others through which they can form, accept or sustain personal relationships with them. It is this which can not only stimulate dialogue between the PCSOs and public but create the relationships for ongoing dialogue. An important and related aspect to face engagements are the farewell displays that PCSOs can perform which imply or encourage future contact. These closing gestures can allow people to feel considered by and familiar with the PCSOs and leave a positive impression of the relationship and interaction without creating burdensome expectations.

Two important elements of PCSO face engagements are accessibility and acquaintanceships. The accessibility of PCSOs in the public space can facilitate their heightened readiness for and responsiveness to social contact with the public and has the potential to contribute to them establishing a situational presence that can be experienced by all those around them both implicitly and explicitly. Persons in their presence can indirectly observe PCSOs' gestures and face encounters with others or directly enter into face engagements with them. Acquaintanceship is identifiable in all relations between PCSOs and the public. From distinguishing their general status as uniformed policing representatives or members of the public, accepting greetings through to knowing exclusive information, such as names, PCSOs and the public can always mutually identify each other. The regular presence of PCSOs in localities can develop the acquaintanceships they share with members of the public both informally and formally. Attending the same places and coming across the same

people allows the PCSOs to informally build on their previous ‘seeings’, or encounters, of said persons to learn more about them and the locality. Alternatively, PCSOs can develop acquaintanceships formally when they are introduced to people through a policing related matter, participation in a specific intervention or a third party. The progression of acquaintanceships can bring about a social bondedness that increases the access between PCSOs and the public for face engagements with each other in passing or as part of unplanned visits or planned meetings in both public and private spaces. It is this aspect of PCSO acquaintanceships that can facilitate ongoing two-way dialogue, contribute to them developing their understanding of communities and involving people in local policing.

CONCLUSION

The research shows how the interactional space offered by foot patrol can support PCSOs in connecting with their localities to potentially provide a type of support, gain a type of insight and cultivate a type of relationship that would be hard to gauge and develop from the position of the vehicle. Overall, it provides practical insights that show the importance of utilising an interactional understanding of patrol work; illustrate the continued relevance of foot patrol and the ongoing utility of the PCSO role in Neighbourhood Policing; and support the use of ethnography to study patrol practice in future research.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Future research could specifically focus on the application of an interactional understanding of patrol in Neighbourhood Policing in different policing environments, employed by a number of different NPTs across a range of police forces in the UK and involving populations with a variety of demographics. It would be useful to understand how this perspective is applied by police officers and staff, how it is interpreted by the public and the type and nature of the impact it has on developing citizen and community engagement.

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