

Policing the socially disadvantaged, the value of rekindling community policing in Woolloomooloo – A Police Commander's perspective

Introduction

This paper provides an insight into the observations and experiences of a Police Commander providing policing services to Woolloomooloo, a socially disadvantaged suburb within the Kings Cross Local Area Command (LAC) in inner-Sydney.¹ From those experiences the author identifies future directions for the rekindling of community policing within New South Wales police.

Between December 2001 and August 2004 the author² was the Commander of Kings Cross LAC. Kings Cross is a challenging area to provide policing services with the extremes of social disadvantage and affluence uniquely blended in the most densely settled residential area in Australia. Add to that complexity, Darlinghurst Road, the infamous 24 hour adult entertainment strip where high rates of illicit drug usage, alcohol-related violence, prostitution, homelessness, organised crime and anti-social behaviour are the norm. In the shadows of the flashing lights in a valley bordered by Darlinghurst Road and Art Gallery Road is the suburb of Woolloomooloo, a small cluster of predominantly Department of Housing residences nestled on the shores of Woolloomooloo Bay. Woolloomooloo Police Station can be found in Tom Uren Place under the railway viaduct.

First impressions

My first introduction to Woolloomooloo came late at night in the summer of 2001. There were sixty homeless people in varying stages of mental and physical health bunked down around the perimeter of Tom Uren Square. They were closely packed and it was impossible to gain access to the police station. Not that it mattered, it was closed. Over the coming weeks I spent considerable time talking with residents and community service providers to gain an appreciation of how we could improve policing services.

These conversations revealed consistent themes:

- A small number of youth from a small number of families were responsible for most of the crime and malaise in the area;
- The identities of these offenders were well known to most residents who observed their activities on an almost daily basis;
- Due to the constant changeover of police, the residents were reluctant to speak with them or provide information about criminal activity because they didn't know them or have faith they would stay around;

1 Within New South Wales Police a Local Area Command (LAC) is the primary point of service delivery. A LAC is ostensibly an autonomous business unit aligned to Local Government boundaries that consists of between 100 to 250 generalist, investigative and support staff.

2 Superintendent Dave Darcy BSc, BSocSc, MCrim (Syd), is currently a Visiting Fellow at the Australian Institute of Police Management. The views expressed by the author are his own and do not necessarily reflect views held by New South Wales Police.

- Other service providers were experiencing challenges with the same families and individuals;
- The police didn't seem to know or be able to differentiate between the 'good' kids and the 'bad' kids;
- Crime was out of control, particularly street level drug dealing in the vicinity of Sydney Place and 'steal from motor vehicle' offences;
- Kids as young as five were being encouraged to assist in petty crime particularly theft from cars by being 'lookouts';
- Service providers responsible for lighting, garbage collection, and graffiti were ignoring the area;
- Large numbers of homeless were bedding down in Tom Uren Square, a community meeting place and location of the local supermarket;
- Police services were inconsistent and residents never knew when police would be rostered for the area;
- There were no Police and Community Meetings and police did not know the issues that were concerning the community.

Residents fondly recalled a time some years back when a police Sergeant and a small number of police provided a very personalised service to them. They reminisced as to how the police Sergeant and his staff had a very detailed knowledge of the area and knew many of the residents on a first name basis, knew their kids and often helped out with things that weren't necessarily strictly police business. The residents felt these police genuinely cared for the area and the people they served.

These police knew the identity of the crooks and focused on keeping them in check and locking them up whenever they could. But the police had a softer side with the kids, particularly those in their preteens, who police knew were doing it tough with extremely challenging family situations. Ostensibly the community was describing the practices of community policing and intelligence-lead policing from a time before these practices had a name.

I observed that some police displayed a generalised disdain for the area, labeling all Woolloomooloo residents as 'shit'. Fortunately they were in a small minority. My enquiries revealed that the number of full-time police stationed at Woolloomooloo had, over time, been reduced to four officers. However, on many occasions these officers were required to work from Kings Cross and in many instances police with no or little knowledge of Woolloomooloo were rostered to work shifts. When they did work at Woolloomooloo they stayed in the station and completed paper work. From my initial discussions many did not know, nor did they understand the unique challenges of providing police services to Woolloomooloo. They saw it as a tough unpredictable place where there was a high chance of being injured or assaulted. They worked there because they were told to; there was no evidence of a connection to the community.

A number of junior police commented that when they did conduct a foot patrol in Woolloomooloo they found it frustrating that they could not identify the local active criminals who were responsible for the majority of crime in the area. When they did chance upon a crime or suspicious activity, the suspects, armed with local knowledge, quickly disappeared into the labyrinth of lanes, alleys and other hiding places.

Some in the community commented that the 'new' police were tough on all youth, good or bad. It is in these conditions that observed injustices towards youth, who are lawfully going about their business, permeate the general community and attitudes towards police deteriorate rapidly. The visiting police sense this incivility and respond in kind and so commences a spiral of decline in police-community relations.

When walking through the area I had observed that upon seeing my blue uniform small children would run away as fast as they could, the very antithesis of what I had experienced in the leafy suburbs where young kids almost always give the policeman a wave.

Interagency cooperation had also deteriorated. A meeting with the local principal at Plunkett Street School confirmed my suspicion that police, though encouraged to participate in school life, were not available or had not made the effort to maintain this most valuable relationship. The same could be said for relationships with the Department of Housing and the Department of Community Services where once successful joint patrols had fallen by the wayside.

Three issues that were demonstrably important to the community and a source of frustration at police inaction was the movement of large numbers of homeless into Tom Uren Square, overt street level drug supply in Sydney Place and 'steal from motor vehicle' offences largely committed by youth.

The community complained bitterly about the presence of homeless people in Tom Uren Square. It was their public square, a meeting place and it was being occupied by large numbers of homeless a small proportion of whom behaved in very confronting ways and many within the community felt unsafe. Following a number of nasty experiences, where their kids observed people exposing themselves, public urination and sexual behaviour, the community were reluctant to send their kids up to the store on their own to buy milk. The presence of the homeless was interfering with their quality of life and the community 'wanted something done about it'.

Many in the community were particularly confronted by a small number of youth that congregated in the vicinity of Sydney Place and were very active in selling cannabis. Their intimidatory behaviour and the activity of clients was disturbing to many in the community, whose residences overlooked the activity and for those walking past. For those residents, the very brazen and open nature of the drug dealing was symbolic of a general malaise in the area and of police having lost control of the streets.

The large number of thefts from cars committed in the area also struck a raw nerve with the community. Local residents frequently observed small groups of youths checking out cars, rummaging through them or breaking their windows and scampering off with the loot. They reported seeing kids as young as five being used as look-outs for the older kids. The piles of broken glass on the streets were symbolic of a lawless neighbourhood. An interesting twist was that for the most part residents were not direct victims of this crime as they knew it was folly to keep any valuables within their car. Whilst the sheer brazenness of the behaviour was troubling, what concerned community members most was observing young children being inducted into a life-time of crime and no one doing anything to prevent it.

Rebuilding Community Policing in Woolloomooloo

The picture painted from those first impressions of Woolloomooloo is of a policing service that had drifted from a community consensus model towards a militaristic model; that of an occupying force. In socially disadvantaged areas community members have a far higher

chance of coming into contact with police and those interactions are more likely to be negative. These negative interactions merely become an extension of a broader experience of social injustice and alienation. In these conditions police-community relations are susceptible to breakdown.

As a police leader it is my responsibility to construct an environment conducive to the reinvigoration of the community consensus model. Whilst the obvious benefits are improved policing efficiency and acceptance and participation by the community, it is our moral and ethical responsibility to ensure we do as much as we can to reduce the likelihood of social injustice that is the overarching consideration.

Staff selection as a crucial element to reinvigorating community policing

Some officers seem innately equipped with the skills to provide high quality community policing displaying a unique capacity to communicate and engage the community, to actively seek solutions to problems and not confine themselves to legal remedies. They are 'outcome focused' and highly self-motivated and disciplined and require lower levels of supervision. There is another larger proportion of officers who have the commitment and willingness to learn the art of community policing and if coached and mentored correctly, make fine community police.

We selected Sergeant Howard Fox who was very experienced at policing Woolloomooloo and exhibited the desired qualities of an exceptional community police officer. In a significant shift from prior reporting arrangements he was placed in command of Woolloomooloo. The primary motivation for this change being that I wanted to ensure the staff stationed at Woolloomooloo worked there. By being in 'command' he alone was responsible for the provision of policing services at Woolloomooloo. I expected him to remain in the position for two years.

Police numbers were doubled from four to nine and volunteers were sought. I also transferred the Youth Liaison Officer (YLO) from Kings Cross to Woolloomooloo. By placing the YLO at Woolloomooloo I hoped these newly selected officers would not only gain a greater appreciation of the roles and responsibilities of the YLO but would work more closely with them. The other advantage was that the majority of incidents involving youth were located in Woolloomooloo and it brought a specialist closer to the problem.

Expectations of a Commander

Following selection I requested all staff to attend a meeting where I revealed my expectations and over the coming months I continually reinforced these messages:

- Reinvigorate relationships between the community and police. Adopt a 'country style' policing philosophy. Characterised by the community knowing the face of their police, knowing their first name, knowing they could approach them with any difficulty or concern. Conversely it was about their developing a very detailed knowledge and understanding of their patch and knowing the people, the good and the bad.
- Identify children at risk and have an appreciation of their family backgrounds and the difficulties they face.
- Develop at practitioner level strong collaborative working relationships with other government and non-government service providers and work as advocates for the community. I wanted to see evidence of joint operations with DOCS, working with the local primary school, the Department of Housing, and carers of the homeless.

- Take every opportunity you can to have positive interactions with kids. Ensure we become an almost permanent fixture at the school and are regularly incorporated into daily sporting and play activities.
- When patrolling in uniform, engage kids in positive interactions, be it waving at them to say hello or by speaking or playing with them.
- Listen to the community and actively seek information on the issues that are troubling them and report back to everyone.
- Take the crooks head on through overt or covert means, in particular the street level drug dealing and 'theft from motor vehicle' offences and the receivers of those stolen goods.
- The community isn't served by you staying behind a counter in the police station. Stay out of the Police Station at every opportunity, but leave a sign on the front door that provides your contact mobile phone number.

Community Safety Officer role vital for sustainability of social development strategies

There was also a need for planning, co-ordination, implementation, and most importantly on going support of social development strategies. This responsibility lay with the Community Safety Officer, Constable Gary Groves. Constable Groves had strong project management skills and played an instrumental role in the initiation of:

- **NRMA Insurance Street Retreat Program** — a program targeting kids at risk between the ages of seven and twelve aimed at improving relationships with the local youth through sharing positive experiences with police in an adventure camp atmosphere;
- **Regular patrols of police with the Kings Cross Adolescent Unit;**
- **Enhancements to the Woolloomooloo Police Citizens Youth Club (PCYC)** --- including expansion of hours to overlap with peak youth crime, and development of programs focusing on building self-esteem, health and general fitness.

Constable Groves also spent considerable time working to improve interagency service coordination and integration with the plethora of government and non-government service providers that were active in the area. This work perfectly complemented the efforts of Sergeant Fox and his team.

The reformation of the Woolloomooloo Police-Community Consultative Committee (PCCC)

One of the strengths of Woolloomooloo is that, despite the relatively high levels of social disadvantage, there is a reasonably strong sense of community and attendance at community forums is quite high. In these conditions consultative meetings are very useful in engaging the community.

Accountability and the building of trust through honouring commitments underpinned the development of the Woolloomooloo PCCC. The meetings were divided into two sessions. In the first session I would provide a report on current reported crime statistics supported by maps and graphs. I would also report on police activity and significant arrests

and issues that were concerning police. The second half of the meeting was chaired by the Local Member of Parliament Clover Moore MP and this was reserved for the community to express their concerns and to seek action from police. The meetings were held quarterly and designed to allow us to listen to the concerns of the community, develop operational strategies or other responses, and then report back on what had been achieved since the previous meeting.

The first meeting was well attended but quickly deteriorated as a number of people very vocally expressed their frustration at the lack of service provision, not only from police but from all service providers. There was a strong feeling of skepticism in the air as I announced the doubling of police numbers and the movement of the YLO to Woolloomooloo. However the meeting calmed as I introduced Sergeant Howard Fox as the new commander of Woolloomooloo and described my recent experiences in listening to their concerns and how I saw the way forward. I described what I felt were their three primary concerns; the homeless in Tom Uren Square, street level drug dealing in Sydney Place and 'steal from motor vehicle' offences committed by youth. The meeting at times erupted as members of the community passionately described some of their experiences.

There was great value in having the Local MP Clover Moore chair the second half of the meeting. She was seen as an independent advocate for the community and willing to hold to account service providers that didn't perform. From my perspective it meant a high level of accountability where the credibility of police services was independently assessed on a regular basis. There was no room for 'spin doctoring', either you had done what you said you were going to do or you hadn't and it made for better service provision. Of all the elements of the consultative process this regular independent oversight of performance was by far the most efficacious in improving police community relations.

The first steps

The months preceding the next community meeting were very challenging, with the focus being to honour the commitments we had made. I continued to reinforce my expectation to the new recruits although I recognised the journey for them consisted of 'small steps'. Additional specialist support from Kings Cross Drugs Unit was brought in to conduct a covert operation on the street level drug dealers in Sydney Place. There was increased high visibility policing with our new recruits. Many valuable leads started to trickle in from the community once they saw their local cops about.

With a firm but fair hand, Sergeant Fox relocated the homeless from Tom Uren Square to a vacant block across the road. This was the most popular action taken and it significantly improved the amenity of the square. The small distance of relocation meant that services to the homeless weren't disrupted. As the same police were now occupying the area they began to develop relationships with the homeless. Combined with the mentoring from Sergeant Fox, the 'new' police learned the art of negotiation with heavily intoxicated or mentally ill persons.

Cops and kids — positive interactions harder than it looks

Surprisingly, one of the most challenging tasks was getting our 'new' police to genuinely engage young children. One of the most effective conduits for the development of those forms of interaction is play.

Whilst some police quickly took to the task, others were more reticent as they did not believe that playing with kids was a legitimate policing activity. I observed those first interactions and for some it was awkward, after all they were mostly in their early twenties,

the last thing they were thinking about were kids. The principal of the local Plunkett Street School, Marguerite Kramer strongly supported this strategy and it didn't take long to obtain some dividends. Some weeks later I recall walking down to the gates of the school in the afternoon and a small boy asked me if he could wear my cap. I was pleasantly surprised, we had achieved a milestone. I handed it to him and beaming with excitement he placed it on his head.

Over the coming months police spent considerable time playing with the kids. With the assistance of the teachers and staff from the school and after day-care centre, the police also developed a detailed appreciation of the difficult circumstances of many of the 'at risk' children. This knowledge continued to grow through interaction with the Department of Community Services and Department of Housing. An informal network at practitioner level was being rekindled and the kids and community were better for it.

Consolidation of police community relations — time to express some leadership

The following PCCC was far more positive. The community was grateful that the homeless had been removed from Tom Uren Square. A number of street level cannabis dealers had been arrested and Sydney Place was currently free from drug dealers. Although the 'steal from motor vehicle' offences hadn't reduced appreciably, we had made several arrests with the help of the community and some from just good old fashioned police work. As promised we had listened to the community concerns, responded to them and reported back on our progress.³

The successive PCCC meetings built on this relationship. It had a synergistic effect. The community recognised we were committed to providing a high level of service. As the trust grew, the resilience in the police-community relationship strengthened, and so too our capacity to influence community attitudes and perceptions of crime and disorder.

The change in the dynamics of the meetings allowed us to clearly articulate our position, not just in an operational and legalistic sense but from a broader social justice perspective. It was in these conditions that I felt confident to articulate our operational response as a series of moral and ethical challenges.

The enormous benefit of this approach was that once the underpinning philosophies of our police response to an issue had been explained and debated there was a much deeper shared understanding of these very challenging and confronting issues. In these conditions community acceptance and participation in the policing focus was almost guaranteed, provided we continued to be a contributing partner.

For example it was inevitable that the drug dealers would return to Sydney Place within one or two weeks. With an eager client base, excellent multiple supply chains, willing sellers, for a whole range of reasons it was (and remains to this day) an ideal location to supply cannabis. Prior to the reinvigoration of our relationship with the community one could have predicted that such an explanation would have been met with stinging criticism with the theme being that the problem was out of control. I was confident to frankly concede that it was going to be an ongoing problem for Woolloomooloo. However I gave a commitment to listen to the community and regularly run operations to fetter the activities and introduced the concept of 'pruning the hedges' and our commitment to keeping them trimmed. Whilst the community did not find drug dealing acceptable in their street they

3 The author recognises the professionalism, dedication and commitment of the police officers that worked at Woolloomooloo Police Station during this period and in particular the efforts of Sergeant Howard Fox and Sergeant Gary Groves.

were also sympathetic to the difficulties of completely eradicating the problem. From a community policing point of view the key issues were that we had listened, that we responded and that if the problem re-emerged we would again 'prune the hedges'.

One of the most challenging issues to debate with the Woolloomooloo community was youth crime. In the absence of our input there was a very strong 'tough on crime' mentality. Despite a number of arrests in the initial months we had been relatively unsuccessful in reducing the rates of 'steal from motor vehicle' offences. In these conditions the focus of discussion shifted towards the inadequacy of lenient sentences of offenders upon conviction. It would have been very easy to fuel that discussion but we were now confident that we could influence the community's attitudes towards crime and disorder we chose a more considered route. Armed with an appreciation of the unique challenges of 'at risk' kids within Woolloomooloo I could forcefully argue that we needed to do everything we could to prevent them entering the criminal justice system. It was unacceptable to passively stand back and watch them leap onto the conveyor belt of crime.

I expressed a commitment to focus on interagency cooperation, particularly at practitioner level. I also impressed upon the community that these forms of social development strategies were unlikely to reap immediate benefits. It may be ten or more years before the young children we are focusing on reach their early to late teens, a prime time for experimenting with criminal behaviour. There was approval of this position, provided we maintained our focus on reducing the incidence of the 'steal from motor vehicle' offences.

Was the reinvigoration of community policing worth the effort?

Six months after we made the commitment to reinvigorate community policing in Woolloomooloo it was clear that very valuable dividends had already been realised. The local police were developing a detailed knowledge of the community and the other agencies responsible for service provision in the area. There was strong evidence they were engaging the community and there was a confidence amongst the police that I hadn't previously observed.

Community policing is frequently seen, by city cops at least, as a responsibility of specialist liaison police. For many it is not a core policing function and regarded as a soft option to those that find 'operational' (locking up crooks) policing too hard. However Sergeant Fox, through his leadership and community policing expertise, was a catalyst for a significant shift in this workplace culture. He powerfully demonstrated there was a balance to be struck between locking up crooks and listening to the community. Community policing wasn't a soft option, it was a smart option, not only professionally but personally.

I strongly suspect that as the police came to develop relationships with the general community, and their interactions with the homeless and local criminals increased, that the environment in which they worked became more predictable and less stressful. One of the greatest benefits was that community policing was no longer seen as the domain of one liaison officer. All police at Woolloomooloo were committed to this form of policing, though in varying stages of development. The key threat to this form of policing is staff turnover and diligent succession planning is required to ensure that gains are not lost.

In fact, as their confidence and competence grew, there was a number of incidents where during arrests police were assaulted or placed themselves at unnecessary risk. Upon review of those matters I found they had identified offenders and in lengthy foot pursuits (remember they now knew the area as well as the crooks) found themselves one on one with offenders.

Armed with knowledge and support from the community, policing techniques became more discerning and less reliant on stereotyping. Knowledge of the identity and activity of local criminals increased considerably and many were arrested. This targeting of the 'right' people significantly increased operational efficiency and success. Indiscriminate focus on youth by police was reduced significantly and the community appreciated this more considered approach. The local knowledge and up to date intelligence also enhanced the success of specialist support police such as the Kings Cross Drugs Unit. This improved efficiency led to a regular destabilisation of the cannabis, ecstasy and heroin supply chains as well as some of the stolen property distribution networks.

Collaboration at practitioner level with peers from other service providers gave police a detailed appreciation of the circumstances of 'at risk' children and other issues within the community. The police acquired a broader range of skills and problem solving capacity and for many, no longer saw a legalistic approach as the first option.

Armed with this knowledge police were more vigilant to observe young children being inducted into criminal enterprise and would work with the local school, Department of Community Services and other service providers to reduce the likelihood of them entering the criminal justice system. There was a complete turnaround in the behaviour of young children towards police. No longer would they run away but would instead have very genuine positive interactions.

There was also a marked difference in the approach of the parents of 'at risk' children. Parents were now more willing to accept police intervention where previously they were met with skepticism and hostility.

As the years progressed the Police Community Consultative Committee meetings became increasingly focused on other issues. In many ways it shifted to a limited multi-agency community forum where City of Sydney, Department of Housing, Department of Community Services and other representatives would be present and increasingly required to answer the concerns of the community. Frequently more than half of the concerns raised by the community were the domain of other agencies.

During the summer of 2003, due to staff turn over, operational planning lost its focus and cannabis dealing, youth-related crime and homelessness were not as promptly addressed as the community expected. At the next PCCC meeting ninety members of the community very vocally expressed their dissatisfaction with the police service. It took considerable effort to regain lost ground. In the following PCCC over one hundred residents attended and once again voiced approval of policing services. This incident was a stark reminder of how quickly things can deteriorate and how community policing requires consistent application.

Corporate lessons and possible future directions for New South Wales Police

During Commissioner Ryan's years in office there was an increased focus on targeting crime hotspots, recidivist offenders, and generally improving the capacity of NSW Police to investigate crime and bring offenders before the courts. Commissioner Moroney has consolidated that effort by increasingly relying on governance processes to build on Ryan's efforts.

However, during this period there appears to have been a reduced commitment to the maintenance of Peelian⁴ principles that were so readily embraced during Commissioner Avery's tenure. It's not that community policing has been consciously abandoned it's just that it seems to have dropped down on the list of corporate priorities.

In recent years New South Wales Police have placed an increased effort on focusing on 'problem-oriented' and 'evidence-based' policing but we have forgotten the contribution of community policing that so solidly underpins the success of these two strategies. In the absence of community policing there is a real danger that the application of these two strategies may lead the community to view the police as an 'occupying force'. This is particularly the case in areas of social disadvantage where potentially confrontational contact between police and the community is far more likely. It is essential that we police with the 'consent and approval of the public' and that these strategies are underpinned by that great Peelian, time-honoured principle that; 'The people are the police and the police are the people'.

This paper has demonstrated there is enormous value in reinvigorating a community policing model in a socially disadvantaged area. The benefits include:

- a stronger acceptance and participation by the community in policing services;
- a community more willing to share information and experiences with local police;
- a policing service more attuned to community expectations;
- police less likely to indiscriminately focus on youth;
- improved investigation efficiency;
- a police community relationship that has the resilience to endure challenging or confronting events;
- a genuine focus on interagency cooperation at practitioner level;
- police confident in developing solutions to crime and disorder that are not necessarily legalistic in nature.

These benefits cannot be ignored and at a corporate level there is an opportunity to rethink how we police areas of social disadvantage. Policing the socially disadvantaged cannot be done on the cheap, it requires the selection of the right staff with the appropriate skills set willing to embrace community policing, an ongoing commitment to succession planning and the building and maintenance of multi-agency cooperation.

The rekindling of community policing in Woolloomooloo confirmed the utility and enduring qualities of Peelian principles that should be regarded as the foundation stones of policing philosophy. Despite this paper demonstrating the efficacy of community policing, NSW Police has in recent years drifted toward a reliance on high profile, high impact policing activities as a key corporate strategy in driving down crime. In the absence of effective dialogue with local communities there is a real risk this form of policing can alienate the communities that most likely need our help.

To recognize always that the power of the police to fulfil their functions and duties is dependant on public approval of their existence, actions, and behaviour, and on their ability to secure and maintain public respect. Sir Robert Peele 1829.⁵

Dave Darcy

Visiting Fellow at the Australian Institute of Police Management.

-
- 4 Reith, Charles, *A short history of the British Police*, Oxford University Press, 1942, page 64. History regards Sir Robert Peel as the 'the father' of the Metropolitan Police Force (London) that came into existence in 1829 and as a key advocate of an early style of community-based policing.
- 5 Sir Robert Peele's 3rd principle of policing in Reith C, *A short history of the British Police*, Oxford University Press, 1942.