

English Summary

The Community Police Reform: An Evaluation Study

Authors:

Peter Lindström, Anna Pauloff and Sven Granath

Published by:

National Council for Crime Prevention (BRÅ)

P.O.Box 1386

SE-111 93 Stockholm, Sweden

Internet: www.bra.se

Reference:

BRÅ-report 2001:5

ISSN 1100-6676, ISBN 91-38-31774-5

Available in Swedish from:

Fritzes kundservice

SE-106 47, Stockholm, Sweden

The objective of the community police reform was to change the traditional and often reactive working practices employed by the police. The reform emphasise crime prevention activities and local co-operation. In order to change the working practices it was deemed necessary to decentralise certain parts of the organisational structure. The reform, work on which was started in 1993, is an important part of ongoing efforts to realise the principle crime policy aims of reduced crime and increased security. On the initiative of the Government, the National Council for Crime Prevention has examined the community police reform and evaluated the work conducted by the police to combat everyday crime.

The community police reform as both an organisational and an operational change.

One of the fundamental concepts guiding the community police reform was that locally based police would be responsible for the majority of the work within a specific geographical area. Instead of having police officers who worked exclusively with crime prevention and others who worked exclusi-

vely with the maintenance of order and criminal investigations respectively, the goal was to have generalists, proficient across all these areas.

The accounts presented by the National Police Board show that in the year 2000, the number of community police officers lay at almost 6,400. This corresponds to 40 per cent of the total number of police officers in Sweden. The current study shows that half of the country's community police officers, i.e. 20 per cent of the police force as a whole, might be characterised as generalists. One-quarter of community police officers work exclusively with emergency response operations whilst one-fifth work primarily with the investigation of crime.

It is the intention of the Government that community policing will constitute the foundation of the police organisation. If this is taken to mean that the work of the police should primarily consist of generalist policing, then the community police reform cannot be regarded as fully implemented. For many police officers the reform has probably meant little more than a name change. Police officers who were formerly labelled patrol officers or investigative officers are today referred to as community police officers without any real changes having taken place in their working practices.

Local police stations open during office hours

The number of police stations in the country increased by approximately ten per cent between 1992 and 1998. By the year 2000, however, the number of police stations was more or less the same as it had been at the beginning of the 1990s – around 400. On average, the local police stations are open to the public five hours per weekday and have telephone hours corresponding to six hours per day. Few local police stations are open in the evenings or at weekends.

Problem-oriented policing must be developed

One objective of the community police reform was to employ a problem-oriented approach in close collaboration with those living and working in the area. The Government has emphasised that this strategy should apply to all police work, not just community police operations. In order for the local police to be able to apply a problem-oriented strategy, knowledge is needed on the problems experienced in a given area and by those living there. The charting of local problems has relied to a very great extent on information relating to crimes reported to the police. About 25 per cent of the community police areas used alternative sources of information, such as citizen surveys.

In community police areas, with a large proportion of generalist police officers, it is more common to use other sources of information in addition to data relating to crimes reported to the police in the work of charting local

problems. In these areas, the opportunities for developing problem-oriented strategies are probably better than in other community police areas.

Increasing numbers of crime investigations are conducted by community police officers

One of the fundamental ideas behind the community police reform is that crime, which affects the individual and creates insecurity within the local community, should be dealt with and investigated by police in the area where the crime was committed and reported. Youth offences should also, as far as possible, be investigated by local police officers in the area where the youth in question lives.

Since the mid 1990s, a growing proportion of police investigations of everyday crime, such as simple assault, shoplifting, and vandalism, have been conducted by community police officers. In those police authorities where a higher proportion of crime investigations are carried out by community police officers, the numbers of cleared offences improved between 1995 and 1998 as compared with police authorities where this work had not been decentralised. In the case of the number of persons convicted of everyday crime, which is dropping across all police authorities, trends are less negative in police authorities where responsibility for crime investigations is more focused on the community police organisation.

The assessment of the National Council for Crime Prevention

The generalist police model has its advantages – but specialist competence should be improved

It has been shown that what has been referred to as the generalist police model has its advantages. If the same police officer who works together with housing companies and tenant groups can also investigate offences in residential buildings and participate in emergency response operations, the results of police work are likely to be improved.

In order to work effectively against certain types of offences, however, specialist competence within the community police organisation should be improved. A certain amount of specialisation among community police officers is understandable to some extent. Younger police officers may find it easier than their older counterparts to work nights and weekends, for which reason they are more often to be found working in emergency response operations. As a rule, the investigation of criminal offences requires expertise which is only acquired over time, and thus older police officers are more often found working in this area.

The requirement of local access must be weighed against efficient police work

The question of police resources is often discussed, not least in the media. Another question that is at least as important is the issue of how the police make use of the resources available to them. Combining community police areas and closing local police stations often gives rise to heavy criticism. For the public, the nearness of the police is important. This requirement must however be weighed against the opportunities available to the police to work efficiently.

The National Council's assessment is that community police areas that are too small cannot function efficiently or provide the service that citizens have a right to demand. The question of the optimal size of a local police area and the optimal number of police officers for such an area must to a greater extent than today, especially in metropolitan areas, be determined by the level of need in that area for both reactive and proactive efforts on the part of the police. A more goal-oriented adaptation of available resources to existing needs would allow for the toning down of the issue of the need to increase police resources.

Improve operational planning

The problem-oriented approach to police work should be developed both within the community police organisation and in relation to the rest of police operations. The operational plans drawn up by the local police areas should be adapted to local conditions to a greater extent than they are today so that they function as steering documents for the operation as a whole. It is also important that alternative sources of information, such as citizen surveys for example, are employed more systematically. In order to make the problem-oriented approach more effective, police officers at different levels should continually be provided with additional training and instruction.

Crime investigation work well within the community police organisation

In this study, the investigative work conducted by local community police officers has been shown to be as good as or better than investigations conducted by central investigative units. One explanation for this is probably that many of the local police officers carrying out such investigations are experienced crime investigators. Continuing to let the local police authorities conduct investigations of everyday crime is of considerable benefit since such investigations provide valuable information on crime and offenders in the local community police area.