Community Policing in Cork: Awareness, Attitudes and Correlates

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Abstract: Understanding of, and attitudes towards community policing were examined by a questionnaire survey in Cork in 1984. At that time, half of the respondents felt that local crime was at least a "fairly serious" problem, but levels of awareness and understanding of the policing proposals were relatively low. When explained to them, most people were in favour of the scheme and about half were willing to participate. These attitudes were related to the respondents' personal characteristics, and to their perceptions and experience of crime. Residents of high-risk localities are less willing to participate than those of areas where crime is not seen as a serious problem.

I INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, the increase in crime in Ireland has received considerable attention (Rottman, 1980, 1984; Breen and Rottman, 1985). Following examples in Britain and the USA, community policing has been suggested as one response to these problems. The Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors (AGSI) made detailed proposals for a comprehensive scheme of community policing (Doyle, 1983), while the Garda Representative Association favoured the simpler, less formal scheme known as Neighbourhood Watch which is widely used in Britain. The latter proposals have been adopted by the Department of Justice, with pilot schemes initiated in Finglas and the Store Street area in Dublin in 1984, and their later nationwide extension (although few schemes are in operation at this time).

The response by social scientists to these proposals varies from a guarded endorsement (Rottman, 1984) to trenchant criticism (Bennett, 1983; McCullagh, 1985; O'Carroll, 1985) (although it should be noted that most of the critical analysis related more to the AGSI proposals than to the Neighbourhood Watch scheme which has been adopted). Most of the adverse comment relates to

the nature of modern (especially urban) communities, and to the relationship between the police and the public. It draws heavily on experience elsewhere and attempts to apply this to the Irish situation.

One important element which is lacking in this debate is the attitude of the public, since, by definition, community policing is contingent on a favourable response by people to it. The Gardai administered a brief questionnaire in the Finglas area in early 1984, but this only measured people's attitude to Neighbourhood Watch and their willingness to participate in it. (Also, the findings have not been made public.)

This paper is concerned with the public's perception of community policing and their attitudes to it in Cork in 1984. It is based on a questionnaire survey of 299 adults in the city in March and April of that year. Respondents were selected through a two-stage sampling scheme. The 74 wards in the county borough were stratified on the basis of car-ownership (as a surrogate for socio-economic status) and 9 wards were randomly selected (3 from each of 3 strata). Respondents were drawn from the registers of electors in each ward through systematic random samples. Strictly speaking, the survey is representative only of the population of Cork County Borough, but it is probable that the findings are relevant also for other Irish cities at least.

The paper will first examine respondents' experience and perception of crime. The next section is concerned with their awareness of the community policing proposals, their understanding of them, and their attitude and willingness to participate in their localities. It will also consider their opinions about organisation and costs. Finally, the relationship between people's experience of crime and their social characteristics, and their attitudes towards community policing is examined.

II CRIME EXPERIENCES AND ATTITUDES

The respondents were divided in their perception of crime in their localities. Some 8 per cent considered the problem to be very serious and 42.8 per cent thought it fairly serious. The remaining 49.2 per cent felt either that local crime was not serious or that there was no problem at all. Only 5.4 per cent of the sample felt that their local problems were worse than the city average.

Respondents were also questioned about the specific problems of their localities and their own and neighbours' experience of crime. The reported crimes were specified by the respondents and lack the accuracy of a victimisation survey (Breen and Rottman, 1983, 1985), but they still represent the experiences that Cork people considered most important. Less than a quarter of the respondents (23.1 per cent) had been personally affected by crime while 48.2 per cent reported that their neighbours had been affected. There was a strong

overlap between the respondents and their neighbours being crime victims; together they accounted for 53.8 per cent of the sample.

The most commonly reported crime was home break-ins (Table 1). There is no doubt that this is *not* the most common crime in Cork, but it does seem that people are very conscious of it and willing to report it. (Breen and Rottman found that over 88 per cent of all burglaries were reported to the police; only car theft had a higher reporting rate among six offences.) It is also probable that people remember these incidents for a longer time than other offences, and, in surveys like the present one, where no time period was specified in the victimisation question, that home break-ins may seem disproportionately common. The victimisation rate for this crime in Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford in 1982/1983 was 3.5 per 100 households, according to Breen and Rottman (1985), supporting this interpretation of the present data. The reverse is true of vandalism, petty theft and disturbances of the peace, with true rates almost certainly higher than those in the table. The ESRI survey, for example, found vandalism rates of 8.1 per cent, almost double the present rate. Many respondents probably did not consider minor incidents worthy of reporting in the survey. Consequently, the data must be regarded as reflecting people's perceptions and fears of crime rather than their incidence in any single year.

Table 1: *Experience and Perceptions of Crime in Cork, 1984*

| | Percentage reporting: | | | Relationship to seriousness of perceived crime[a] | | |
	Occurrence in locality	Personally affected	Neighbours affected	Occurrence in locality	Personally affected	Neighbours affected
Noise, disturbance of the peace	8.7	2.0	0.3	0.21	0.22	—
Vandalism of home or property/petty theft	22.7	4.3	9.4	0.39	—	—
Vandalism of car/ syphoning of petrol	4.7	2.3	3.7	0.16	—	—
Home broken into	30.8	8.4	29.8	0.50	0.22	0.29
Money/property stolen	6.7	3.7	4.7	0.24	0.16	0.28
Car stolen	14.7	4.0	10.4	0.31	0.16	—
Money taken by force/ physically assaulted	3.3	0.0	1.7	—	—	—

[a]Cramer's V: All statistics significant at 0.05 level.

Also, it was not possible to examine the accuracy of these perceptions for the different wards in the survey; Garda crime statistics are not available on a disaggregated basis for such a comparison.

Despite these reservations, there were significant relationships between the respondents' own experience of crime and their perceptions of its seriousness in their localities (Cramér's V of .360 for being personally affected and .359 for neighbours who were victims). The best single predictor of seriousness in each case was home break-ins (Table 1), reflecting the impact of this offence on its victims, while theft of money, property or cars had weaker relationships. Perceptions of crime seriousness were not related to the respondents' social or demographic characteristics like age or social class, so there is no profile of people in fear of crime, other than their past experience of it.

When asked to make suggestions for reducing local crime, 73.6 per cent of the sample made at least one recommendation (Table 2). Over a quarter of respondents suggested that more Gardai were required. Interestingly, this is the only suggestion which correlated with dissatisfaction with the activity of the police. Some 29.1 per cent of respondents were dissatisfied with the guards but the relationship between this and calls for more police (phi. = .29) suggests it may have been a perceived *lack* of local Garda numbers which concerned people rather than any police behaviour *per se.* It may also, of course, have been perceived Garda ineffectiveness which could be rectified by an increase in numbers. There were also suggestions for heavier punishment for offenders and more foot patrols by the Gardai.

Table 2: *Suggested Solutions to Local Crime*

Suggestion	Per cent of Sample
More police	25.1
Community co-operation	14.4
Alternatives for young people	14.0
Stricter punishment	11.4
Improved parental control	9.7
More foot patrols	7.7
Tackle social causes	5.7
Improved home security	3.3
Vigilantism	0.7

The second most popular suggestion was for some form of community involvement. This ranged from neighbours keeping an eye on each other's houses to more organised committees who would monitor and report troublemakers to the police. For the purpose of community policing, this implies that a fairly substantial minority were already thinking of this possibility and were sympathetic to it. Most of the other suggestions were concerned with the social or familial conditions for crime and the lack of opportunities for young people especially.

III COMMUNITY POLICING

Only 43.8 per cent of the sample claimed to have heard of the proposals for community policing in Irish cities. This is considerably lower than in the 1984 British Crime Survey where 57 per cent said they had heard of Neighbourhood Watch (Hough and Mayhew, 1985). The difference is probably due to the earlier introduction of the scheme in British cities and the greater publicity it received there. A substantial number of the Cork residents admitted that they did not understand the proposals, leaving only 31.4 per cent of respondents who felt they knew what was involved. Even among these however, there was considerable confusion, with only 20.7 per cent of the total sample understanding the idea of Neighbourhood Watch groups.

The Garda proposals for Neighbourhood Watches were outlined to the respondents and their opinions were elicited. A large majority (88.3 per cent) felt it was a good idea. Interestingly, this is almost identical to the British attitudes, where almost 90 per cent approved of Neighbourhood Watch (Hough and Mayhew, 1985). The reasons given by Cork people who did not favour it varied widely. Some felt it would degenerate into vigilantism, others feared retribution by criminals, and others argued that activists in the scheme would have power without responsibility or training and could develop into local élites without any accountability. Almost three-quarters of the sample (73.6 per cent) felt that people in their localities would participate in a Neighbourhood Watch. When asked about involvement from their own households, over half (53.2 per cent) expressed a willingness to participate themselves, while slightly less (49.8 per cent) felt that some other adult in their households would get involved in the scheme. (Correlates of the opinions are examined below.) In 1984, some 63 per cent of the Crime Survey respondents were prepared to join neighbourhood schemes (Hough and Mayhew, 1985). This is probably related to the greater awareness of community policing in Britain.

Respondents also gave their opinions on the organisation of community policing in their localities. Over half (56.2 per cent) were willing to nominate local residents who would act as organisers but there was no consensus about whom these might be. The most popular suggestion (15.1 per cent of the sample) was for representatives of residents' associations, followed by local priests (12.7 per cent) and police (12.4 per cent). There were many other suggestions about "qualified" people — teachers, businessmen, peace commissioners, community workers, and politicians were all nominated, but in every case by only 6 or 7 respondents. This lack of consensus about organisation is not surprising, given people's general lack of knowledge about community policing. Moreover, it may reflect a preference for a less structured type of Neighbourhood Watch. This was the case in Britain, where even 63 per cent of those willing to participate felt that people should make their own arrangements rather than

being organised on a formal basis (Hough and Mayhew, 1985).

Less than half of the sample (48.2 per cent) felt that existing local organisations might usefully participate in community policing. Residents' Associations were the most popular choice (31.1 per cent of the sample), followed by youth groups and sports clubs (7.0 and 5.4 per cent respectively). It is rather ironic that part of the rationale behind the latter groups may be a desire to divert into community policing youthful energy which might otherwise find an outlet in petty crime and vandalism! On the other hand, Bennett (1983) suggests that youth involvement in crime deterrence could be very beneficial to those involved since it represents "real involvement" and would better prepare people for adult life than many existing youth programmes.

Some 43.1 per cent of respondents felt that residents should have to contribute towards any costs that might be involved in policing schemes. This is a substantial number, and when combined with the 17.4 per cent who felt the local authority should bear the costs, it reflects a willingness for local involvement which is surprisingly large. Some 36.5 per cent of the sample felt that funding for local policing was the responsibility of central government, and there were several suggestions also for levies on insurance companies, and increased fines for vandals which could support Neighbourhood Watch schemes.

IV   CORRELATES OF COMMUNITY POLICING ATTITUDES

One seeming contradiction in community policing research is that residents in high-risk areas are less willing to participate in such schemes than are people in safer neighbourhoods. In the British Crime Survey, for example, 71 per cent of higher income families in low risk areas (3 per cent of households burgled including attempts) were prepared to join Neighbourhood Watches compared with 58 per cent of people in the poorest council estates (burglary rates of 12 per cent) (Hough and Mayhew, 1985). Similar trends have been found in the USA (Lavrakas and Herz, 1982). This is usually attributed to a lack of community spirit in high-risk areas, although it is probably that fear of criminals also is a factor.

This pattern is also evident in Cork. Some 84.2 per cent of people who felt that crime in their localities was either very or fairly serious thought that community policing was a good idea, compared with 92.5 per cent of residents in low-risk areas. As regards willingness to participate, 50 per cent of the high-risk residents themselves were prepared to do so (versus 56.5 per cent in the low crime areas) and 68.4 per cent felt that other local people would become involved (78.9 per cent of low-risk residents).

These differences are not due to lack of information in the high risk areas; in fact the reverse is true. A higher proportion of those residents were aware of

community policing (48.7 per cent) and had some understanding of it (35.5 per cent) than those living where crime was no problem (38.8 and 27.2 per cent respectively). It seems therefore, that exposure to crime increases people's awareness of possible solutions but reduces their willingness to participate themselves.

This dichotomy between awareness and attitude/participation also applies to other variables. Table 3 shows the bivariate relationships between community policing and selected demographic and crime variables. These reinforce the finding that awareness and understanding of community policing are related to people's perceptions and experience of crime. More serious incidents like house break-ins and robberies especially have this effect. Willingness to participate shows either no relationship to the crime variables or an inverse one. This may seem to be contradicted by the positive correlation between respondents being personally affected by crime and their willingness to be involved in community policing. The more detailed correlations between the actual incidents (as categorised in Table 1) and willingness shows, however, that this was confined to people who had problems of cars being vandalised or petrol syphoned. Victimisation to more serious crimes did not result in a willingness to be involved in community policing). It seems also that people do not view Neighbourhood Watch as an alternative to regular policing. It is those residents who are already

Table 3: *Relationships between Respondents' Characteristics and their Attitudes to Community Policing*

	Awareness	Understanding	Favourable attitude	Residents willing to participate	Personally willing to participate	Other household member willing to participate
Age	.13			-.13		-.19
Chief wage-earner	.16					-.17
Sex (male)	.14	.19	-.14			-.10
Housewife	-.10	-.14	.15			.14
Social class	-.10					
Parent					.14	
Number of children in household					.23	.18
Perceived local crime seriousness	.10			-.13	-.12	
Burglaries in locality	.13	.13				
Robberies/assaults in locality	.10	.15				
Personally affected by crime					-.10	.10
Neighbours affected by crime	.13	.10				
Satisfaction with Gardai					.10	

Coefficients are phi and point-biserial. All are significant at .05 level.

satisfied with Garda activities in their areas who feel that their neighbours will participate in these schemes.

The social correlates of the attitudes also vary. People who are aware of the proposals are more likely to be older males, chief wage earners and in the higher socio-economic groupings. It was women, particularly housewives, who were favourably disposed to the idea, and it was the younger respondents, particularly parents with children in the household, who expressed a willingness for themselves or another family member to participate in Neighbourhood Watch. It may be that these are the people who have most to lose to criminals and they are motivated by self-interest, or it is possible that they are the types who are normally involved in local community activity anyway and that they see Neighbourhood Watch as just another potential community responsibility. In either case, it further isolates those people in high-risk areas, particularly the elderly who are living alone, and for whom the idea of community policing might seem very beneficial.

An important issue arising from these correlations is the interaction between the respondents' characteristics and their perceptions and experience of crime. Are younger people, for example, more likely to participate in Neighbourhood Watch irrespective of how serious they consider the local crime problem to be, or is this confined to low-risk areas? This was examined through partial correlations of the respondents' characteristics and attitudes while controlling for perceived crime seriousness and their own and neighbours' experience of crime. Almost all of the correlations in Table 3 were unchanged after partialling out the crime variable, and they also remained significant. No other important characteristics reached significance with partial correlations, so it seems that, overall, the profiles of awareness, etc., are not dependent on whether people live in low- or high-risk parts of the city.

The correlations in Table 3 are admittedly low but they are consistent and in agreement with findings elsewhere (Hough and Mayhew, 1985). Attempts to develop multivariate discriminant models were not successful. There is a lot of collinearity in the data and the models did not provide any further insight beyond the bivariate relationships.

V   DISCUSSION

Community policing attempts to control crime levels through direct public involvement. In Cork in 1984 there certainly was public concern at crime levels, with over half of the sample feeling that crime in their localities was at least a "fairly serious" problem. Attitudes towards community policing were strongly favourable and a substantial number of people expressed a willingness to participate. The correlations between these attitudes and people's socio-

demographic characteristics could be used to identify target groups for greater understanding or participation.

As against this, it must be noted that there was a generally low level of awareness and understanding of community policing in Cork in 1984. People's attitudes and their expressions of readiness to participate were not so much informed, considered opinions as immediate reactions to the proposals as outlined by the interviewers. Almost certainly, people are more aware of Neighbourhood Watch by now, although the 1984 British Crime Survey would suggest that a substantial minority are still ignorant of it. It is difficult to predict whether greater understanding results in increased willingness to participate.

Another concern is the relationship between perceived crime levels and attitudes to community policing. The data in the paper indicate that, for whatever reason, people in high-risk areas are less likely to establish and participate in Neighbourhood Watch Schemes than are those in more stable, low-risk localities. Special efforts seem necessary to inform people in problem areas of community policing and to encourage them to participate.

The ultimate test of community policing is whether it reduces crime. In theory, it should have two effects: a direct one whereby increased surveillance reduces opportunities for crime, and an indirect impact whereby a local community becomes more integrated and establishes informal controls on deviant behaviour (Bennett, 1983). According to press reports, some Neighbourhood Watch Schemes in the USA have reduced local crime by up to 40 per cent (*The Irish Times*, 1984). It is less clear what impact these schemes have on areas where they are *not* in operation. Do they displace crime to these areas which are seen to present easier targets to criminals? Do they exacerbate the problems of regular policing in high-crime areas, both by reducing the number of police who may be available because of commitments elsewhere in community policing, and by straining the relationship between police and public in those high-risk areas where there is no involvement in Neighbourhood Watch? These considerations deserve careful monitoring and analysis. Otherwise, community policing may well have unintended effects and exacerbate social differences.

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