

Peacebuilding and Policing – The Role of Community-based Initiatives

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Over the past decade an elaborate and sophisticated variety of community-based initiatives have been established across Northern Ireland to assist in the maintenance of public order and the reduction of inter-communal conflict and violence. These include the creation of numerous networks of interface intervention monitors, various groups of independent human rights and violence observers and several hundreds of people who have been trained to act as marshals and stewards at parades, protests and other public events.¹ These initiatives began as a response to violence in interface areas and disputes over parades, with both forms of violence linked to the political transition from armed conflict to a peaceful and democratic society. The community-based initiatives were thus largely conceptualised and presented in terms of forms of conflict intervention or conflict management and as an element of a wider range of peacebuilding activities.² Although this has always been a key aspect of these activities, and particularly so in the early years of the peace process, the work was also a form of policing in its most basic sense in so far as it was a means of maintaining public order and responding to both the potential for and actual outbreaks of public disorder.³ Furthermore, over the period of transition, as peace has become more embedded and established as the norm and the community-based activities have continued and developed, they have become more obviously primarily a form of policing rather than an element of peacebuilding. Nevertheless, many of the people who are involved in forms of monitoring, observing, marshalling and stewarding might well balk at the idea of considering themselves to be acting as a form of police.

Given the history of policing in Northern Ireland and the continuing contentious nature of policing, in spite of the reforms that have been introduced, it is not surprising that community activists should be cautious and concerned about considering their work as a form of policing. However, as a result of the wholesale changes that have been undertaken in both the conceptualisation and practice of policing in both the national and international sphere over recent years, it makes much more sense to interpret the forms of violence deterrence, intervention and monitoring as an element of policing activity rather than simply as peacebuilding work or conflict intervention. Since the early 1990s there has been increasing recognition of the difference between the police as an organisation and policing as an activity. This has not simply been an academic exercise but has also been demonstrated in a practical way both by the growing diversity of forms of policing activity on the ground that exists beyond that undertaken by formal police institutions, and the willingness of policing organisations to work in partnership with such other policing actors, both individually and organisationally. These changes were both noted and encouraged in relation to policing in Northern Ireland in both the Patten Report (1999) and the Criminal Justice Review (2000). Patten, for example, advocated that the reformed policing body should adopt a model of 'policing with the community', which would include 'the community participating in its own policing'.⁴ However, both reports were vague about what this more active community involvement might actually entail.

The growing diversity of policing work over recent years has been evidenced by a dramatic rise in the number of private security firms undertaking a range of public order maintenance activities.⁵ These have expanded from the more traditional roles of private security in guarding industrial sites, warehouses, or providing security to the rich and famous, to the extent that various forms of privatised security have become a basic feature of daily routines. As door supervisors, bouncers, stewards, marshals and wardens they patrol, observe, monitor and guard shopping malls and individual shops of all sizes; they vet people and control entry to clubs, bars and other spaces associated with the growing night-time economy⁶; they search people and monitor physical and verbal behaviour at football matches, sports events, festivals and music events; they work in housing estates controlling access to common areas and responding to local problems⁷. The various forms of private security have slowly but surely become a fundamental agent in the monitoring and management of public order.

Although interest in the growing diversity in forms of policing has largely been focused on the private sphere, in which providing greater levels of safety and security is essentially a business and a profit making activity, there are also a growing range of examples of community-based initiatives that are designed to fill a gap or respond to a need that the state cannot fill or meet effectively.⁸ In particular, these include forms of community-policing patrols that have been documented in diverse locations including Australia⁹, England¹⁰, South Africa¹¹ and the USA¹². These activities have generated concerns in some sectors of society and have been perceived by some as nothing more than a form of vigilantism¹³, but in many cases they come to be recognised as an acceptable form of activity and a useful addition to the collective policing repertoire. The remainder of this paper briefly reviews the main forms of community-based conflict management and policing activity that has been developed in Northern Ireland over recent years and then considers whether there is any potential for its future development and consolidation as an element of the increasingly diverse network of policing activities.

Community-Based Policing in Northern Ireland

The most extensively developed of the community-based conflict intervention work has been the creation of networks of community activists to monitor and respond to interface tensions and disorders. These are often referred to as ‘mobile phone networks’ due to their adoption of this technology as a means of maintaining contacts while monitoring the situation on the streets. The first of the formal interface monitoring networks was established through the Community Development Centre in North Belfast in 1997, and involved activists, residents and community workers from both main communities across the complex mosaic of segregated communities that make up the area. The phones enabled the members of the networks to monitor key flashpoints, to respond to rumours and incidents and also to liaise with their counterparts in the neighbouring areas and thus to synchronise responses and effectively co-manage any incidents.¹⁴ The networks were also extended to include representatives of key statutory agencies, including the police, housing and social services to facilitate speedier and more effective responses to any disorder. Since 1997 the role of interface monitoring networks in helping to maintain order and reduce tensions has become recognised as a basic element of local conflict management and relationship building. All interface areas in

Belfast, and those in many other towns, have well-established and effective procedures for monitoring, intervening and responding to potential or actual outbreaks of disorder.¹⁵ The networks have come to be considered not simply as a useful form of conflict management but in many places they have become a basic feature of local order management and the primary response to potential for public disorder.

The first of the current cycle of independent observer projects was set up in Portadown in the late 1980s in response to the earliest phase of protests against loyal order parades along the Garvaghy Road. When the disputes over parades flared into a more widespread and serious issue after 1995 a diversity of independent observing was undertaken.¹⁶ These included projects focusing on policing and human rights by groups such as CAJ, Pat Finucane Centre, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, international solidarity and peace observers and more localised projects initiated through groups such as Women Together. The work of these projects differed from that of the interface monitoring networks in that in general they did not aim to intervene directly in a situation, rather observers aimed to watch what took place and reduce the potential for violence by their presence or by the subsequent publication of reports.¹⁷ More recently independent observers were utilised to assist in the reduction and management of interface violence in East Belfast. A network of volunteers, co-ordinated by Mediation Northern Ireland, Belfast Interface Project and Tides Training, was deployed to assist and support the work of the local community activists. This project began in the late summer of 2002 following an invitation from both local communities and involved observers being deployed on either side of the interface, as well as helping to facilitate contact across the boundaries and between the communities and the police. The independent observers were eventually withdrawn in 2004 and the work was taken up by members of the local communities.¹⁸ Similar approaches have subsequently been applied to tensions in Antrim and North Belfast, although on a more limited scale.

All of the parading organisations had long utilised their members to act as marshals to help manage their parades, but they were largely regarded as honorary roles and were never considered to be particularly effective in controlling unruly behaviour among those parading. However, in the winter of 1997-1998 the Parades Commission sponsored an accredited training scheme for the Apprentice Boys, which helped create a cadre of effective and competent marshals and gave fresh impetus to explore the potential for

developing the marshalling of parades.¹⁹ Since that time the Apprentice Boys have developed their skills in marshalling the main parades in Derry/Londonderry and have also adapted their skills to other events and activities. Subsequently, a more limited training programme for marshals was developed by East Tyrone College and by 2003 this had been delivered to more than one thousand people across Northern Ireland, most of whom belong to one of the main marching organisations. Over the same period many of the community groups involved in organising protests against parades have also taken greater responsibility for stewarding the crowds they encourage onto the streets and managing public order and they have increasingly deployed organised groups of individuals as formally designated stewards. Thus the physical space between those marching and those protesting is invariably policed by a variety of groups. Marshals try to manage their members, stewards aim to control the protesters and each group aims to reduce the need for action by the police. Nevertheless, the police retain the ultimate responsibility for maintaining public order and responding to outbreaks of disorder.

Roles and Responsibilities

There are both similarities and differences in the nature and form of the community-policing work undertaken by the different types of monitors, observers, stewards and marshals. In all cases the work involves individuals, usually working as part of a team, maintaining a physical presence on the streets at potential sites of tension and disorder. This is in many ways akin to the police concept of beat patrolling, although it is usually carried out in a very restricted geographical area, an interface, a street corner, a parade route. Nevertheless, each of the volunteers has, or develops, a detailed local knowledge of specific spaces and places and thus has an awareness of the potential triggers for and early warning signs of disorder. The volunteers also rely to a great extent on their personal knowledge of and relationships with local residents, young people and of local groups and they are able to act effectively because they each have a degree of local authority. This may come from their political affiliation, their personal history, their membership of a particular organisation or simply their status as a known and respected local figure. Even the independent observers rely to an extent on personal relationships as they will usually only be deployed with the support and the agreement of key figures or groups from the local community.

The importance of such local knowledge is one factor limiting the role of monitors, marshals and stewards to engage only with members of their own community or organisation. Parade marshals largely focus on managing the behaviour of those involved in the parade and who thus implicitly come under the authority and responsibility of the organisers, although at times they will also speak to spectators if they are from their own community. Where problems are linked to opponents of a parade it is assumed and expected that the police will deal with the situation. Similarly, interface monitors will only deal with members of their own community and will liaise with their counterparts on the other side if the disorder is occurring on both sides. On occasion workers on either side of an interface may try to synchronise their attempts to reduce tensions and thus reassure members of their respective communities that the other side are similarly trying to exert control and prevent disorder.

The similarity with more formal policing structures is enhanced by a number of factors. Many of the community-policing workers wear visibly identifiable distinctive items of clothing, which serves to distinguish them from others on the streets. Stewards and marshals are usually defined by an armband, a tabard or a tee-shirt, while some observers have more elaborate clothing including fluorescent jackets and protective hats. The interface monitors have generally avoided distinctive clothing but some have recently begun to use such as a means of distinguishing themselves from the larger crowd in which they may be working. Many of the different categories of community-policing workers also use forms of communication technology, including walkie-talkies and radios as well as mobile phones; they may also make notes, log incidents and prepare reports of their activities. They also work in teams rather than individually, which creates both a sense of collective identity and enables them to call upon support at critical moments. The community-policing workers also usually work within a structured and often hierarchical framework. Individuals will have received some form of prior training; they may also be expected to participate in briefings prior to each event or occasion for deployment from those leading or co-ordinating the work.

There are also some differences in the levels of active intervention expected of each of the roles. The independent observers, as the name indicates, are present largely to watch and record what occurs, and any deterrent effect will be due to their physical presence rather than due to any

active intervention. But in some cases, for example the Mediation Northern Ireland network, observers will report problems or incidents to other local actors and ask them to intervene. In contrast the interface monitors, stewards and marshals all expect to intervene in situations of deteriorating order. Usually this will involve speaking to the relevant individuals, occasionally by physically positioning themselves to limit the potential for disorder and sometimes by calling on the police to engage. The potential of such activists to use or threaten use of force has been implied on occasion as a sinister reason why they might be effective in their work, but to my knowledge there has been no formal complaint of any use of force in such contexts. However, the mere physical presence of an individual or group of individuals may suggest the potential for use of force, just as it may in the case of a police officer or a bouncer, and this may in turn be sufficient to deter a troublemaker.

All the approaches involve some degree of interaction or engagement with the police, although in the case of interface monitors and stewards from the nationalist community, this engagement is largely formalised by being channelled through political representatives, approved community contacts or through the independent observers. Nevertheless, over the years there has been a development of the recognition of the differing roles involved in policing contentious situations and the police have increasingly been willing to allow the community-based networks the first attempt to reduce tensions or quell emerging violence before they intervene. This is both an indication of the degree of trust that has been developed in the intentions of the community workers and a level of confidence in their ability to make an impact in certain contexts. At times this has involved the police responding to community requests for them to withdraw or to change their tactics to help reduce tensions. The community workers in turn have acknowledged that there will always be a point at which their involvement will not be effective or appropriate and they will expect the police to intervene. Over a relatively short period of time the community-based policing volunteers have developed a style of practice that has increased the local capacity and ability to maintain order within their communities and reduce tensions and conflicts.

Concerns and Limitations

The different forms of community-based policing initiatives have been viewed as one of the more positive developments of the political transition in

Northern Ireland and a relatively successful addition to attempts to limit disorder and inter-communal tensions. This has led to largely supportive and encouraging responses to this range of work from within the state sector.²⁰ There is thus some degree of contrast in the attitudes to the community-based policing work and concerns that have been voiced about the development and expansion of community-based restorative justice projects. In fact many of the concerns that have been expressed about restorative justice might equally be raised in relation to the various community policing initiatives. These include issues related to an underlying potential for the use of force, the lack of accountability of the groups, the quality of training and respect for human rights, longer term relations with the wider criminal justice system and the sustainability and financial implications of such projects.²¹ I would suggest that there are a number of reasons why the community-based policing work has been subject to less critical consideration than the community-based restorative justice projects.

First, as noted earlier, the work has largely been conceptualised as a form of peacebuilding activity rather than as a form of policing; as such, it is broadly understood as an element of the community relations sector rather than a part of the criminal justice sector. Although it has generally been accepted that community activists and ex-prisoners (both of which are well represented in both forms of community-based work) have an important role to play in peacebuilding and community relations work, the idea that they could or should have a role to play in more formal structures of policing or the criminal justice system has not been so widely accepted. Furthermore, the possibility that individuals who have been associated in any way with any of the paramilitary structures should have a role to play in the future of state policing has largely been discounted by the police, the state and by many of the political parties.

One of the concerns that has been raised against community-based restorative justice projects in discussions related to integration of such work within the criminal justice system²² was that they were too closely associated with paramilitarism, even though one of the expressed aims of such projects has been to bring an end to 'punishment' violence. The historic claims that elements of paramilitarism and punishment activity could be viewed as a form of popular or alternative justice²³ has also raised concerns that restorative justice is little more than an attempt to create an alternative to the state system or as a means of sustaining power and authority within those sections of the

community that are associated with the use of armed force. In contrast, the limited aspirations of community-based policing projects to map out a future role or a place within the criminal justice system has meant that they have not been seen as a threat or challenge to the state. Instead they have been viewed as temporary and context specific initiatives and it has thus been assumed that they would thus fade away once the disputes over parades had largely been resolved and violence at the interfaces had been stabilised.

Third, those involved in community-based policing activities have in general worked to the same objectives as the RUC and PSNI. Although not all of those involved have worked directly with the police, their aims have often been the same and many activities have been to some extent co-ordinated or synchronised at times. As a result the police have steadily grown to value much of the work done by activists on the ground as aiding and easing their work. The community-based policing work has thus raised few concerns from within the PSNI, has generated little hostility and has increasingly been considered as ‘a good thing’ and a type of work that can assist the police in order management.

Finally, the assumed short-term or episodic nature of this activity, and its predominately volunteer base has also restricted any debate about funding and sustainability. Over the years there have been numerous demands for better funding of the community-based work, in particular in regard to funding of mobile phone costs, but as such items have become more widely available funding of the networks has been less of an issue and the focus has shifted to the need for financial support for other more costly diversionary activities for young people. The community-based policing work has thus often been sustained through volunteerism, as an adjunct to other work and through the desire of local people to help maintain peace and order in their communities.

Developing Community-based Policing

The discrete nature of much of the community-based policing work, its relatively low cost to the state, its effectiveness in reducing violence and its apparently limited aspirations to being mainstreamed have all helped to ensure the work has retained a relatively low profile and been subject to limited scrutiny or criticism. At the same time the very same factors that have enabled these activities to be sustained and developed over the years could also be cited as reasons why this type of work could and perhaps should be developed

in the longer term. In fact, despite the implicitly time-bounded nature of the work, some forms of community-based policing activities have already moved beyond the aspirations of the original projects.

Much of the work began in response to outbreaks of disorder and violence: at parades, at protests and at interfaces. For a time it was considered as little more than a form of 'fire-fighting', a form of intervention that was designed as damage limitation activity. Increasingly however, as people began to understand the events and patterns of behaviour that might provoke disorder, the activity became more focused on prevention and in deploying people to deter those who might become involved in disorder. At the same time the work was also associated with attempts to address the causes of the inter-communal tensions. More time has been spent in developing processes of dialogue and discussion that might help to build relationships and thereby help develop mutual understanding and thus reduce tensions and the need to deploy people on the streets. From one perspective this is a classic form of community relations and peacebuilding work, but from another it is a form of a problem-solving approach to disorder, which is a fundamental element of basic community policing.

Furthermore, in some areas those people and groups who are involved in interface monitoring have developed their work to focus on the source of some of the tensions, which will often involve a mixture of young people, alcohol, boredom and irresponsibility. They have also noted the similarities between interface disorder and anti-social behaviour and have thus begun to monitor activity and behaviour within the heart of their communities, rather than simply at their boundaries. They are thus aiming to reduce both interface tensions and anti-social behaviour through a single process of monitoring potential flashpoints, a form of both problem solving and crime prevention activity.

Community-based policing work thus has many similarities in approach and ethos to contemporary approaches to policing by state bodies. The approach to developing a model of community policing that is currently used by the PSNI is based upon five core elements: problem solving, empowerment, partnership, service delivery and accountability. This approach was itself adapted from a model developed by the South African Police Service following the reform of policing in the country after the collapse of the apartheid regime. The approach to violence reduction and order management that has been developed at community level in turn mirrors the priorities

established by official policing bodies. The work has shifted from a reactive ‘fire-fighting’ approach to a proactive problem solving one that is based as much on discussion and dialogue in and between the various communities as it is on the streets. The approach is also based on empowering individuals, groups and the different communities to attempt to respond to and address the issues and problems themselves rather than relying on outside agencies; but at the same time the approach also relies on partnership working with other groups as well as with different statutory agencies, and does not assume that order can be maintained by one group, one sector or one community alone. The approach also provides a service that is designed to increase a sense of safety and security on the ground and is largely provided by people working on a voluntary basis and from a sense of responsibility to their local community. The final element, accountability, is more problematical. While many activists would argue that they are ultimately accountable to their community and their authority to act effectively is an indication of the support they have, others question how accountable those involved in community-based policing really are.

Community-based policing work has been established as a valuable element of conflict reduction and order management in many areas of Northern Ireland. Practitioners have developed a variety of approaches to suit a range of different situations and the work has been broadly welcomed by many from within the statutory sector. However, in contrast to the debate about restorative justice, there has yet to be any real consideration about whether this type of approach to maintaining order has a long-term future in Northern Ireland. Such a discussion could usefully contribute to a wider debate on the future strategies of both community safety and the consolidation of a more widely accepted system of policing in the north.

Notes

- 1 A note on terminology: Different groups and organisations use different names to describe their activities (See Bryan and Jarman, 1999). In this paper I use the term ‘monitor’ to describe those forms of activity that allow for direct intervention in a situation and use ‘observer’ to describe work involving watching and indirect intervention; I use the term ‘marshal’ to refer to those responsible for controlling the behaviour of people in a parade and the term ‘steward’ to refer to those who manage crowds in fixed locations.
- 2 Van Tongeren et al, 2005

- 3 King and Brearley, 1996; Waddington, 1994.
- 4 Patten Report, 1999, para 7.2.
- 5 Johnston, 1992.
- 6 Hobbs et al, 2003; Hadfield, 2006.
- 7 Crawford, 2003.
- 8 Elliston, 1993; van der Spuy, 2001.
- 9 Blagg and Valuri, 2004a, 2004b.
- 10 Sagar, 2005.
- 11 Baker, 2002.
- 12 Marx and Archer, 1976.
- 13 Abrahams, 1998; Johnston, 1996; Pratten and Sen, forthcoming.
- 14 Jarman, 2003.
- 15 Jarman, 2006a.
- 16 Bryan and Jarman, 1999.
- 17 See, for example, CAJ, 1996; also, Human Rights Watch, 1997.
- 18 Byrne, 2005.
- 19 Byrne and Jarman,
- 20 Jarman, 2006b.
- 21 Fitzgerald, 2006a, 2006b; NIO, 2006; McCambridge, 2005; Walker, 2005.
- 22 NIO, 2006.
- 23 Bell, 1996; Munck, 1988.

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