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N8 Policing Research Partnership

Policing Partnerships: Evidence Review

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Background

In recent decades there has been an increased drive towards partnership working, and the development of interagency relations between the police and a variety of other public, private, voluntary and non-profit agencies and organisations. Partnerships have come to be viewed as a key vehicle through which crime and disorder can be effectively tackled, at both the local and national levels, and has become a dominant theme in the rhetoric of public sector reform. Significant cuts to police budgets, as well as the broader context of the economic down-turn and growing social inequality all provide a renewed impetus to revisit these policing partnerships to explore the role of the police therein and the potential for these policing partnerships to impact on social problems in contemporary times. In this rapid evidence review we focus on four key areas of policing partnerships: (1) collaboration between police forces; (2) multi-agency partnerships involving the police; (3) partnerships between the police and private security industry; (4) collaborations between the police and academic community. Where possible this report highlights examples of good practice, as well as gaps in the research which, in conjunction with discussions with police stakeholders, have been used to formulate research priorities for the future.

Key Findings and Future Research Priorities

- Policing partnerships are taking many forms, and there is a need to build a typology of these in the contemporary, pluralised policing landscape.
- Policing partnerships are embedded within and affected by the wider conditions of policing and it is important to explore how these conditions, such as austerity and the economic down-turn, impact on their operation
- A strong policing partnership can foster a collective sense of purpose, with benefits for crime prevention, community safety and public security, as well as reducing duplication and saving money.
- As policing partnerships become increasingly diverse, issues of governance and accountability deepen. This is an area that could be explored in future research.
- The level of partnership working between the police and their partners varies considerably. Strong leadership, clear but flexible structures and long-term resourcing has been found to be essential, yet some policing partnerships are poorly coordinated, under-developed and under-resourced. Some policing partnerships are also insecure and transitory because they are rarely embedded in local institutional arrangements.
- A mixed picture exists of relations between the police and their various partners, ranging from co-operation, co-location, strong communication, data sharing and mutual aid to indifference and hostility.
- Conflicting agendas, ideologies and cultures can act as a barrier to fruitful partnership working. Issues of distrust are particularly highlighted as preventing successful collaboration.
- The similarity of the themes emerging from existing research on policing partnerships suggests that future research might fruitfully focus on how this evidence-base can make a greater impact on policing partnership practices.

1. Introduction

Policing partnerships have proliferated across the British criminal justice landscape, becoming particularly prominent following the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. Police collaborations are widespread and increasing ([HMIC 2012](#)). However, the 20 per cent cut to police budgets as a result of the Comprehensive Spending Review in 2010 and growing social inequality provide a renewed impetus to revisit the value, role and impact of policing partnerships. Policing partnerships are varied in their scope and in who they involve ([HMIC 2012](#)). This review covers: (1) Partnerships between police organisations, principally in England and Wales; (2) multi-agency partnerships involving the police; (3) partnerships between the police and the private security industry; (4) partnerships between the police and the academic community. With the exception of the latter, they broadly map onto the types of partnerships identified in the HMIC ([2012](#)) report. It also focuses on four questions: (1) What does the patchwork of policing partnerships currently look like? (2) What are the conditions under which policing partnerships have arisen? (3) What are the advantages and disadvantages of working in partnerships? (4) What factors inhibit and encourage partnership working?

2. Partnerships between Police Organisations

Despite suggestions that police forces in the UK should be merged, such amalgamations have yet to take root, except in Scotland. However, police forces have been encouraged to work more closely together, in part through legislative changes, including in the Police Act 1996, which was more recently amended in the Policing and Crime Act 2009 and the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011. A significant proportion of police collaborations involve partnerships between police services in a single region ([HMIC 2012](#)). Most of these partnerships are based around protective services but increasingly they also involve other more visible and specialist functions as well as back-office services. Kent and Essex Police have been highlighted as examples of good practice; in addition to joint working agreements in relation to operational functions and support services, their partnership includes a larger group of police forces in relation to IT services, Project Athena (a crime/custody and intelligence IT system) and a regional intelligence unit and regional asset recovery team ([Home Affairs Committee, 2011](#)).

Partnerships between police forces are relatively new developments. Research is needed to better understand this dynamic area, including whether collaborations yield anticipated savings; the factors that encourage/discourage collaborative relationships; and factors affecting commitment to the partnership through complex negotiations at the outset and over time. Most partnerships are between neighbouring or regional forces but there are exceptions: Project Athena encompasses forces in Kent, Essex and the Eastern region, with 15 forces considering joining. More research is needed to explore these geographically dispersed relations and whether they might become more prevalent. More evidence is also required to look beyond the potential cost-savings of these collaborative working practices and explore, for example, the human rights implications of joined-up intelligence-gathering and surveillance systems and also the implications for the police institution in England and Wales, which has traditionally espoused the importance of localised policing.

3. Multi-agency Partnerships Involving the Police

Multi-agency partnerships involving the police include strategic partnerships and those with a more operational focus. Numerous partner agencies are involved but the police play a key role in most ([e.g. Van Staden et al. 2010](#)). These partnerships have emerged from a combination of changes in government policies and legislation, but also from broader changes in society and recognition of the need to engage communities in the crime reduction activities of the state.

There has been widespread acceptance of partnership working in police forces in England and Wales ([O'Neill and McCarthy, 2012](#)). The main factors that facilitate partnership working include:

- the availability of long- and short-term funding from government and other sources e.g. the third sector;
- strong strategic leadership and experienced team members; data sharing and a clear problem focus; clear lines of communication aided through co-location;
- relevant local knowledge, shared aims and objectives between partner agencies;
- shared knowledge of agencies' respective roles and responsibilities;

- compromise, trust and belonging as signified by attendance at partnership meetings ([O'Neill and McCarthy, 2012](#); [Turley et al. 2012](#); [Van Staden et al. 2010](#); [Berry et al. 2011](#)).

Some of the main factors that have hindered partnership working have been found to be:

- differentials in terms of knowledge, meaning that some partners are 'knowledge-brokers' and others not;
- resources, affecting organisations' capacity to attend and to contribute in a meaningful way to partnership decision-making and to what happens on the ground;
- levels of actual and perceived power of partner agencies;
- cultural and ideological clashes, such as about the meaning of crime and its solutions;
- difficulties in sharing data and competing governance and accountability structures ([Crawford, 2014](#); [Hughes and Rowe, 2007](#); [Crawford, 1997](#)).

Future research might map-out the relationships between multi-agency partnerships, as there is a potential for them to overlap and to contribute to the very duplication that they were supposed to reduce. The contribution of multi-agency partnerships to long-term organisational change could also be researched. Organisational change can be a positive, but some of the checks and balances in the criminal justice system are founded on important inter-organisational differences, so-called 'interdependent independence' ([Rock, 1990: 39](#)). Another research question is why the messages from the many studies on what helps/hinders multi-agency partnership working are not making a difference. The extent to which the 'success' or otherwise of multi-agency partnerships depends on the nature of the problem at hand and on the wider social and political conditions that drive them is a further area for future research.

4. Partnerships between the Police and the Private Security Industry

The mixed economy of public and private providers of policing has expanded dramatically. Private security now operates across areas as diverse as the leisure industry, shopping centres, industrial parks and local neighbourhoods; it can be the dominant form of visible frontline policing and can be viewed as having the potential to make a significant contribution to local crime prevention and community safety partnerships ([Crawford et al 2005](#); [Lister 2011](#)). In the current climate of austerity, and in light of regulation (albeit limited), the opportunities for the private sector partnering with the police have gained renewed momentum ([HMIC 2011; 2012; 2013](#)).

There has been much research on the benefits and disadvantages of this pluralised policing field. The level of partnership working varies considerably; partnerships are often poorly coordinated, under-developed, insecure and transitory. Relations between the police and private sector range from co-operation to indifference and hostility. Noaks ([2008](#)) identified an apparent unwillingness on the part of the police to acknowledge any role performed by private guards and a situation of confrontation. Conflicting agendas, ideologies and culture have also been identified as a key barrier to public-private policing partnerships ([White & Gill 2013](#)). A lack of trust may also explain the reluctance to share information and intelligence ([Gill 2013](#)). Finally, the increasing presence of private security guards in public and semi-public spaces raises concerns about regulation and accountability. Strong partnerships between police and private security might be encouraged as they can have benefits for crime prevention and detection and may encourage the professionalisation of private security by raising standards of service delivery. Likewise, police would know more about the working practices of the private sector ([Lister 2011](#)).

Key avenues for further research include: the working relationship of police officers and private security actors in a climate of austerity; the everyday realities of these relationships at an operational level; the ways in which accredited private security companies and individuals are utilising their new position; collaborations with the financial sector; and the extent to which private security firms are indeed willing partners.

5. Partnerships between the Police and the Academic Community

For the police, external research performs an accountability function and academics can assist the police with the explanation and understanding of crime. Stanko ([2009](#)) suggests that academic analysis can assist the police service in understanding what the public wants from the police, while the police service are a potentially rich source of data for academic research ([Dawson and Williams 2009](#)). Fruitful collaborations between the police and

academics include: The *Scottish Institute for Policing Research* (SIPR); the *Universities' Police Science Institute* (UPSI) in South Wales; and the College of Policing *What Works Centre for Crime Reduction* (the College also aims to foster an evidence-based professional police more broadly).

Differences in cultures and methods of working appear to hinder successful cooperation ([Bullock and Tilley 2009](#)). However there are several ways in which barriers between the police and academics may be overcome: finding a shared evidence-based language which can link academic knowledge and police problem-solving and strategic thinking; effective dissemination of research findings and their translation into practical actions; and while senior managers might benefit from greater openness to critical academic input, academics could take into account the factors that shape policing practices. Future studies might assess the current research needs of police organisations and reflect on the methods needed to develop and facilitate the transfer of research-based knowledge from academic circles into strategic and operational policing.

6. The Policing Partnerships workshop event

Further insights on policing partnerships came from the N8 PRP 'Policing Partnerships: Current Debates and Directions' event. Many of the issues that emerged at the event resonated with the existing research:

- the need to build a typology of policing partnerships in the contemporary, pluralised policing landscape;
- has austerity encouraged greater partnership working, or a retreat into own organisational silos?
- partnership working and implications for governance;
- public-private partnerships – collaborative or competitive?
- questions raised about trust and information-sharing;
- the role of occupational subcultures underlying partnerships;
- power dynamics – ensuring equality between partners;
- how to best deliver training on partnerships to partners.

7. Conclusion

Policing partnerships take many forms which might benefit from the construction of a typology to capture this variation. With the advent of austerity and the economic downturn it is important to explore how broader social and legislative conditions impact on policing partnerships. While partnership working can foster a collective sense of purpose, with benefits for crime prevention and economic savings, a key disadvantage is that as policing partnerships become increasingly diverse, issues of governance and accountability intensify. The factors that inhibit and encourage partnership working are manifold and the level of engagement and interaction between the police and their partners varies considerably. A mixed picture exists of relations between the police and their various partners. Conflicting agendas, ideologies and cultures can act as a barrier to fruitful partnership working. The similarity of the themes within existing research means that an important area for future research is how this evidence-base can make a greater impact on policing partnership practices.

Further Information

This report is one of a series that was produced by the N8 Policing Research Partnership with support from the College of Policing's Innovation Capacity Building Fund.

The N8 Policing Research Partnership (N8PRP) enables research collaborations that help address the problems of policing in the 21st century. As a regional hub for research and innovation in policing it provides a platform for collaborations between universities, Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs), Government, police forces, and other partners working in policing policy, governance and practice.

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