

The informal tripart relationship between the state, neighbourhood police and community groups: community safety perceptions and practices in a Midlands neighbourhood in the UK

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Abstract

Purpose – *This paper aims to explore the tripart relationship between British police officers, Local Authority representatives and community members based on a Midlands neighbourhood case study. It focuses on experiences of the strengths and challenges with working towards a common purpose of community safety and resilience building.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Data was collected in 2019 prior to enforced COVID lockdown restrictions following Staffordshire University ethical approval. An inductive qualitative methods approach of semi-structured individual and group interviews was used with community members (N = 30) and professionals (N = 15), using a purposive and snowball sample. A steering group with academic, police and Local Authority representation co-designed the study and identified the first tier of participants.*

Findings – *Community members and professionals valued tripart working and perceived communication, visibility, longevity and trust as key to addressing localised community safety issues. Challenges were raised around communication modes and frequency, cultural barriers to accessing information and inadequate resources and responses to issues. Environmental crime was a high priority for community members, along with tackling drug-related crime and diverting youth disorder, which concurred with police concern. However, the anti-terrorism agenda was a pre-occupation for the Local Authority, and school concerns included modern slavery crime.*

Originality/value – *When state involvement and investment in neighbourhoods decline, community member activism enthusiasm for neighbourhood improvement reduces, contrasting with government expectations. Community members are committed partnership workers who require the state to visibly and demonstrably engage. Faith in state actors can be restored when professionals are consistently present, communicate and follow up on actions.*

Keywords *Community safety policing, The state, Partnerships, Communication, Modern slavery, Drugs, Fly-tipping, Anti-terrorism, Youth*

Paper type *Research paper*

Literature review

Police and Local Authority leaders partner to tackle multiple issues across England and Wales, including crime and community cohesion. Partnership working is a British government agenda (HMIC, 2015), including for early intervention and safeguarding (Ford *et al.*, 2020; Solar and Spring, 2020). Consecutive governments supported community safety partnerships, which stemmed from the Morgan Report of 1991 (Home Office, 1991), and were furthered through

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the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act (Hughes and Gilling, 2004), where collaboration became “a statutory duty” (O’Neill and McCarthy, 2014, p. 143). Preventing and tackling localised crime is mostly co-ordinated through a community safety manager, bringing together Local Authority, police, voluntary and private sector partners (ibid). Leaders understanding crime causes and prevention alongside “the policy context of local government and community safety (e.g., in terms of their social make-up and diversity)” is imperative (Hughes and Gilling, 2004, p. 141). Collaboration can be cost effective through shared budgets and workloads (O’Neil and McCarthy, 2014, p. 150); however, some partners withhold information and resources due to organisational survival needs (Martin and Guarneros-Meza, 2013).

Strategic plans are best formed through appreciating grassroots issues, as such, communication between strategists, implementers and community members is crucial. Davies *et al.* (2005, p. 164) highlight long-held understanding that “the relationship between the police and community is vital to enhance not only police-community relations but the effectiveness of the police” through intelligence gleaned from community members, victims and witnesses. Bullock and Leeny (2013) discuss police informal and formal engagement with community members at neighbourhood level as paramount to generating effective solutions to community issues. Hughes and Rowe (2007, p. 317) state that “community engagement and co-production are centrally important”, acknowledging this can be jeopardised by statutory sector performance target priorities. Hamilton-Smith *et al* (2014, p. 173) explain that performance targets of community officers can influence reactive policing, impeding upon ability to focus on community concerns. Bullock and Leeny (2013) found neighbourhood police officers persist with addressing a small section of community needs on limited resources, irrespective of force agendas. Due to competing challenges for community-based officers, the communication loop between them to strategic leaders might be:

- missing key information for strategic planning and joined up responses; and
- presenting a biased lens from consulting with a subsection of the community.

Public confidence levels impact what is shared to grassroot practitioners. The police being regarded as moral guardians is vital for effective practice (Jackson and Bradford, 2009). Public disorder can arise from declining public respect for the police and the state, with perceptions influenced by factors including age, race, income, residential area, as well as crime prevention performance and the levels of solved cases (Keane and Bell, 2013). Negative first encounters with the police can have detrimental impacts, especially with perceived unwarranted and racially prejudice driven stop and search (Awan *et al.*, 2018) or non-responses to race-hate crime reporting (Page, 2020). Relationships between the police and Muslim communities following anti-terrorism security activity can lead to police confidence erosion by those targeted (Li, 2023). Anti-terrorism policing has increased in community policing following 9/11 and subsequent UK attacks (Hughes and Rowe, 2007; Lai Quinlan *et al.*, 2013). Neighbourhood and community police officers are faced with challenges of integrating “intelligence led policing” to address terrorism radicalisation to their community practice (Hughes and Rowe, 2007, p. 321), for which building genuine trustful relationships is key (Li, 2023). This includes facilitating gestures of kindness that support positive community cohesion (Bahadur Lamb, 2013). Public confidence increases in the appearance of “procedural justice” in how people are treated (Hamilton-Smith *et al.*, 2014, p. 174).

Foot patrol to engage community members has been demonstrated as key components to “increasing public confidence” and to reducing “worry”, whereas more “targeting police patrols” tend to have more impact on “reductions in crime and disorder” (Hamilton-Smith *et al.*, 2014, p. 164). However, there can be a “them and us” culture between the police and community, despite scholars indicating the police and public are “one community” (Keane and Bell, 2013, p. 233), making communities safe (Bullock and Leeny, 2013), with recognition that police workforce recruitment is also from the community (Emsley, 1998).

Interestingly, new recruits on foot patrol can be overzealous with “doing people for anything”, instead of applying discretion, which hinders community building rapport and intelligence gathering (Hamilton-Smith, 2014, p. 171).

Police duty includes preventing crime at individual and community level, as well as offering protection (HMIC, 2015). The government directed neighbourhood policing as a priority for accessible police presence to communities (Home Office, 2007). The police mainly (84%) receive community calls considered “non-crime” related to vulnerability and safeguarding issues that are ultimately referred to social services (College of Policing, 2015; Ford *et al.*, 2020). This has direct impact upon police neighbourhood foot patrolling ability (Hughes and Rowe, 2007, p. 333). O’Neill and McCarthy (2014, p. 148) highlight police recognition that while they might be a first responder to an incident, other agencies are better placed for follow-up work to address the issues, including community members with social capital contributing to “area-based problem-solving teams” (Bowling and Foster, 2002, p. 1020).

A further challenge to partnership working is culture clashes and differing working practices. Within the context of partnership working between the police and social services, Ford *et al.* (2020, p. 90) highlight issues with “lack of understanding” of roles and differing “priorities”, along with “poor communication” and “time constraints”. Hughes and Rowe (2007, p. 332) argue that “persistent sources of conflict in the field of multi-agency partnership working is the ‘clash of cultures’ phenomenon” whereby Local Authority partners require layers of permissions before action occurs, whereas police response is more immediate. However, national and local budget cuts to the police have impacted on community policing responses (Hamilton-Smith *et al.*, 2014) and partnership working (O’Neill and McCarthy, 2014, p. 146). Austerity measures have impacted many partners, which directly impacts upon capacity and service delivery, seemingly putting additional pressure on the police to plug first response gaps (Solar and Spring, 2020). An important feature of effective partnership working is commitment to meeting and action (O’Neill and McCarthy, 2014), both of which can be compromised when workload is high (Davies and Biddle, 2018) and budgets are cut (Martin and Guarneros-Meza, 2013; Solar and Spring, 2020). Interestingly, the Home Office (2010, p. 36) envisaged that state pull-back in communities would invigorate community champions to “play their full role”.

Despite such challenges and initial scepticism, O’Neill and McCarthy’s (2014) found police officers valued effective partnership working leading to pragmatic solutions and perceived that benefits outweigh issues. However, national templates and guidance do not always fit localities, which can complicate community safety practice (Hughes and Rowe, 2007, p. 333). Multi-agency working arrangements can be formal, with wholesale teams from different disciplines working together daily, such as with the youth offending services (Muncie, 2015) through to less formal arrangements for joint working, information sharing and making referrals. Policing liaison practices with community members also vary in formality regarding information exchange and solution identification (Bullock and Leeny, 2013).

Our research originated from Local Authority and police aspirations to improve practices within a specific West Midlands community where public servants were beginning to experience hostility. To safeguard those involved, we have anonymised the geographical location and participants. To assist readers with appreciating the community context, we describe the community as like Shaw and McKay’s (1942) “transitional zone” (close to the city centre), with fewer resources and community guardians, and a more transitional immigrant community. In addition to this description, the neighbourhood accommodated a bail hostel and an asylum seeker hostel, with a homeless hostel close by. There are a mix of established community members, through to more recent arrivals on a more temporary basis of residence, as per the “transitional zone” (Shaw and McKay, 1942). Just over 6,000 people live in the neighbourhood and a wide range of languages are spoken, with higher levels of ethnic diversity to other parts of the city. Several young people from this community were involved in a previous study by

[Page \(2020\)](#), which highlighted existing race hate tensions and race hate incidents targeted at a local mosque. The neighbourhood contained spaces akin with community degeneration, for which broken windows theory argues is more likely to attract crime and disorder ([Wilson and Kelling, 1982](#)), although, this is a contested theory where links between degeneration and fear of crime are more likely than actual levels of crime and disorder ([Hinkle and Yang, 2014](#)).

Methods

An established stakeholder Advisory Group was joined by the first author by invitation from Rutgers University consultants (which included the second author). The Advisory Group included a Local Authority community organiser, community cohesion manager and a middle management police force representative. The group mapped out the geographical area for focused attention and co-designed the research and semi-structured interview questions to be used with individuals and small groups of community members and professionals. The research was “inductive” in nature ([Hagan, 2013](#), p. 19), as such, there was no hypothesis or theoretical framework to be tested, and an open dialogue was encouraged to theorise. Our first question was based on ascertaining perceptions of the relationship between the Local Authority, police and community.

[British Society of Criminology \(2015\)](#) ethical practice was adhered to, whereby participants were informed of study aims before voluntarily agreeing to participate, with written informed consent prior to recorded interviews commencing. Ethical approval was granted through Staffordshire University for data collection with adults. We employed a snowball sample following the first round of interviews with professionals and community groups recommended by the Advisory Group, asking participants to signpost us to others. Snowball sampling gains current social knowledge ([Noy, 2008](#)) and is useful for sensitive research topics ([Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981](#)).

Interviews ranged from 20-min conversations to hour long in-depth dialogue allowing for complexity exploration ([Yeo et al., 2014](#)) and details of service delivery experience ([Matthews and Ross, 2010](#)). To overcome language barriers, the principal researcher used researcher-interpreters from Rutgers and a Staffordshire University international student. Several student-researchers [1] supported with recording and transcription. Some community members requested being interviewed in pairs or small groups due to interpersonal and faith-based relationships. An interview at the mosque took place with a large group of mosque attenders, including elders. Community members ranged from mums with small children to people with part-time or flexible working jobs (e.g. a taxi driver) and those who volunteered in the community, along with people unable to work and people in retirement. Those working in the neighbourhood directly with the Local Authority and/or police were invited to take part in the study, irrespective of whether or not they lived in the neighbourhood.

This study shares insights from 30 community members and 15 professionals with representation from faith groups, community organisations and groups, Local Authority, police, education and fire service providers. Themed analysis was conducted upon the transcribed interview data using the process described by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#). Interview recordings were revisited on several occasions to reflectively process participant contributions.

Findings and discussion

For this paper, the authors focus on the key areas of:

- issues and strengths with partnership working; and
- issues and strengths in the neighbourhood.

Further sub-themes (see [Table 1](#)) were identified through [Braun and Clarke's \(2006\)](#) thematic analysis process.

Table 1 Key themes identified through thematic analysis

<i>Issues</i>	<i>Neighbourhood level</i>		<i>Partnership level</i>	
	<i>Strengths</i>	<i>Issues</i>	<i>Strengths</i>	<i>Issues</i>
Environmental crime	Community events with wide stakeholder engagement	Differing priorities of partners (particularly the Local Authority to other stakeholders)	Some access to pooled budgets and financial resources	
Drug-related organised crime, including associated knife crime	Community activists and volunteers	Poor Local Authority communication to the community and tokenistic consultation	Social media crime reporting and police and community information sharing	
Race hate experiences and suspicions of extremism	Community assets such as the park, allotments, buildings and CCTV cameras	Reputational and trust damage	Longevity and consistency of public servants allocated to the geographical area	
Language barriers associated with a multi-cultural community and transient community (including students). Limited youth facilities and resources. Modern slavery associated with school children	Multi-cultural and multi-generational learning and social activities	Austerity measures and associated staffing capacity limitations	Police street visibility and work ethos	
Housing stock, landlords, derelict properties and wasteland	Community groups meeting regularly and providing peer support	Response times to issues by public sector (both Local Authority and the police)	Relationship between the police and the community and the engagement efforts the police went to with all members of the community	
	Community willingness to share information with partners	Local Authority not taking responsibility – passing people from pillar to post	Community informants and guardians	

Source: created by authors

Partnership level strengths and issues

Here we explore issues of communication feedback loops not being used in partnership working and repercussions of breaches in community trust. We discuss the strength from longevity of public service in a locality with community guardians.

Meetings and connections. Formal community meetings with local councillors and the police only happened quarterly throughout the year, but informal connection occurred more regularly with public sector staff visiting community groups. Newsletters were disseminated informing residents of issues raised and associated outcomes; however, these leaflets had limited distribution and were only in English:

[...] I know they [the council] say there is a leaflet going about, but they don't go to everybody, they just do a select area. I don't think they communicate with the whole population. (Community 2)

[...] we feed back to the community members who we think are most focal and the community on the whole want more presence [...] They want more fliers, which we haven't particularly got the resource to do [...]. And then there are language barriers of course [...] Possibly we don't get to everyone because we primarily look at English being the main language so everything is done in English. (Local Authority 2)

Information available in different formats is advocated by [Bullock \(2010\)](#) regarding policing communities, which was not being practiced. However, the police seemingly made more effort to liaise with multi-cultural members of the community using community members who

were able to interpret for them through visits and foot patrol, whereas the Local Authority seemed more focused on community centre connections.

Communication. Communication and information sharing are two-way features to partnership working (Zaghloul and Partridge, 2022), but our findings showed communication was not equal. Community members felt despondent to “tokensitic” Local Authority-led community consultation events:

We have actually gone to consultations where they [the council] have asked for our opinion, but they have already made their mind up before you even get to the meeting [...] You've got to actually listen to the local people in the area because they [the council] just seem to override anything [...] (Community Member 2)

Co-production with community members requires public sector partners to reduce positional power, and as Page *et al.* (2021) asserts, co-production requires a respecting of contributions from all partners. Bullock and Leeny (2013) highlight competing agendas between what central government and communities want, resulting in the overriding of community priorities. Soft-steering, guidance and partnership funding generate more success (Martin and Guarneros-Meza, 2013); all of which the Local Authority needs to use more. Local Authority participants acknowledged their lack of ongoing community connections:

[...] what we haven't done is consistent, regular engagement with communities to start to develop community structures [...] (Local Authority 1).

General statutory sector updates were wanted, although police feedback on highly confidential matters was not expected by community members. This corresponds with Hamilton-Smith *et al.*'s (2014, p. 166) community safety intelligence, gathering findings of community members wanting reassurances and “better engagement and communication processes”. Bullock (2010) discusses the “policing pledge” regarding neighbourhood policing accountability practices to let communities know what actions have been taken, but this is not always actualised, which is demonstrated in our findings.

The school noted they had intelligence that was not always followed up on by the Local Authority or the police. For example, they cited Prevent Duty concerns and the Local Authority not regularly being available to discuss such matters. They also experienced modern slavery issues regarding children forced to leave the country to marry someone overseas, which the police were slow to respond to:

the big thing about a lack of communication is that no-one is doing this on purpose, it's about resources [...] we phoned the police [with modern slavery concern]. They didn't come that day, they came the day after and the family had already left the country [...] it's the same for the local authority, they don't have the resources to come and meet with us [...] (School Leader)

The school was concerned about safeguarding issues and were frustrated by matters not being attended to, but they also understood resource issues. The schools view of the police and Local Authority did not seem to diminish with a lack of action; however, community members were less tolerant.

Reputation and resources. We found repercussion of trust erosion and diminished reputation occurs from under resourced and inconsistent community connections. Local Authority staff acknowledged the impact of their long-term neglect:

[...] The council have got a terrible reputation. The community feel they have been let down over the years over various issues and lack of support. Despite the fact that community work goes on, they feel very let down [...] (Local Authority 2).

The Local Authority was engaged in some community development work, but the community perceived it as insufficient. Communication issues exacerbated community negative perceptions:

[...] The police are doing their job with the community, but the authority don't do as much. For example, I've raised an issue with the council and it's taken months for them to get back in touch and when they do, it's like 'you need to see this person, or that person', instead of dealing with the situation. (Community Member 5)

Being passed to different people costs residents in time and resources. For example, one community member mentioned phone bill costs from a 40-min conversation involving multiple Local Authority staff. Another community member talked about the personal cost of feeling exhausted from reporting the same issues with little resolve:

[...] not impressed with [council] [...] I have been told they have got no money. This morning I have reported potholes, overgrown bushes [...] Grids haven't been cleaned out because they flood the road and it's just, I give up [...] The council said they will come every fortnight [...] It's just like I am nothing. I don't know what to do anymore. I'm just depressed with it. (Community Member 1)

Austerity measures have been evidenced to be negatively impacting UK public sector partnership working ([Zaghloul and Partridge, 2022](#)), and this is demonstrated in our findings. The [Home Office \(2010\)](#) had anticipated that local community activists would get more involved in communities with the state reducing input; however, our findings show that council inactivity leaves community activists fatigued, despairing and ready to give up.

Social media and physical presence. Police efforts were perceived more positively with residents knowing who to report to, and having various reporting methods available. Private social media messaging regarding crime reporting felt safer because neighbours could not overhear through the terraced house walls. The Police commented:

We are more readily available than we have ever been. Even with the cuts and less staff on the street. You can now report to the police via Facebook, online and you can phone us. We have twitter accounts. And that's if you don't see me walking down the street. (Police 2)

While not all reported issues were immediately resolved by the police, the community saw some results, encouraging continued dialogue:

[I] have been helping the police for the last 20 years because there was a lot of crime on my doorstep, and I was feeding them intelligence [...] It took four years, and they got him [...] I have got the emails I can write to them direct, and they have been very helpful [...] they don't give me anything back, I just feed him and they just say, 'keep bringing it'. But it's exhausting because I'm in the right place at the right time. I will see something, and I have got cameras front and back [...] (Community Member 1).

Encouragement and ease of reporting, with eventual breakthroughs after years of persistence, helped to keep this resident passing information on when fatigued. However, other residents were frustrated by the lack of prosecution outcomes for known drug dealers:

they know the people [dealing drugs], we've talked about it, but it's a slow process and I don't like that. These have been dealing for what I know of for 10 years [...] it pee's me off because it should have been done by now [...] this has been going on too long and they haven't even been sentenced. (Community Member 25)

Neighbourhood police visibility was commended, but response times questioned, especially at night when a central response team replaced community policing:

[...] the PCSO are not on at night [...] some of the responses at night are a bit too slow [...] there was one of the neighbours who has been harassed and I phoned up [...] it was about 11:30pm at night [...] there was two men banging [...] But it took them [the police] an hour and 40 minutes to get to that house [...] That was like actually a long time, especially for a vulnerable woman who was on her own in her house [...] (Community Member 2)

To reduce the likelihood of becoming a victim of crime, community members talked about weighing up when to directly intervene on issues or when to stay inside and call the police. Asylum seekers also talked about night-time disturbances making them feel anxious in their rooms, and the police talked about community members having sleepless nights from crime activity.

Informants and guardians. Some community members purposefully shared information with residents known to be police informants, while others intentionally avoided communicating on such matters. Information sharing negatively impacted some relationships within the community but conversely enhanced others. Long-standing community members were what [Shaw and McKay \(1942\)](#) describe as “community guardians” and were arms of the police and wanted this connection with the Local Authority too, but felt their efforts were mostly rejected.

Longevity of public sector staff. One important feature to partnership working was having consistent public sector workers in the area:

[...] Being there as a regular, you can spot me [...] I am speaking to community members, to families, visiting places of worship and other locations where people meet [...] people get used to seeing you around so much that eventually you will get 'I didn't want to phone and waste police time, but this is happening' and then the floodgates open [...] It takes a while to break down barriers [...] (Police 2)

Community members were more likely to talk with public sector employees who were consistently demonstrating commitment to the local area.

Issues and strengths in the neighbourhood area

Here we focus on the strengths of community organisers, events and assets and the issues of environmental and drug-related crime, housing challenges, wasteland areas and a lack of youth amenities.

Community events and assets. A reoccurring community strength cited was large community events at the park drawing people across the community together. However, community members observed people mostly remaining in ethnic groups. Amenities, such as the local community centre, attracted a small proportion of the community, as did the allotments where people valued connection with others and well-being. Some community members found it frustrating that the Local Authority would not undertake small but significant improvements, such as putting in a pedestrian crossing by one of the mosques to support elderly residents more safely using this amenity. The Local Authority was in essence missing “cup of tea” opportunities to connect and show kindness to the community ([Bahadur Lamb, 2013](#)). The Local Authority and police recognised strengths in community organisers and the various community groups, albeit these groups being somewhat fragmented. Asylum seekers did meet together, but were also not integrated into the wider community. The most common community asset for community members to integrate, connect and learn from one another was the local primary school.

Environmental crime and housing and youth challenges. In some UK communities, police priorities of drugs, violence, burglary and vehicle crime are rarely prioritised by community members ([Bullock and Leeny, 2013](#), p. 205). In contrast, we found environmental and drug-related crimes were key priorities. Community members regularly reported fly-tipping to the council, but issues were not fully addressed, whereas council staff were exasperated when fly-tipping re-emerged after collaborative removal efforts with community volunteers. Such events were irregular, which may explain community perceptions of council inactivity, along with council failure to feedback to the community on fly-tipping prosecution numbers:

the residents hate fly tipping, they are always moaning about. We do prosecute, we do fine. It might be in the [name of local newspaper] if you are lucky, but we don't feed it back to the

community. If we did a newsletter once a quarter erm 'fly tipping, these many people were caught and the police said we did these raids and arrested these people' – the community would love it [...] (Local Authority 2).

I would describe it [referring to the tipart relationship] as working, but a little bit strained [...] with the lack of action the Local Authority take over some issues [...] the amount of litter, discarded belongings of furniture and some of the quick turnover of people in houses [...] issues with absent landlords [...] and the standard of accommodation. That's the issues I hear about [...] (Fire Service 1)

Described is the lack of council action on both environmental crime and housing issues. Community members explained that a lot of privately owned housing had become rental accommodation, with transient occupiers seemingly less committed to home and neighbourhood upkeep. A participant from the fire service also talked about the challenges from short-term rentals to students, whereas longer standing community members helped each other with property maintenance. Residents were perturbed by empty or demolished houses and wanted regeneration on wasteland. It was such areas that were often targeted with the environmental crime of fly-tipping, and as such, the broken windows theory of crime (Wilson and Kelling, 1982) does have some relevance. Bullock and Leeny (2013) found neighbourhood appearance helps residents feel safe. Our participants further clarified that pride of place, and a sense of worth, is impacted upon when neighbourhood appearance diminishes. Residents proposed a new youth centre could occupy the wasteland due to there being few community buildings and nothing for young people, which may be aggravating antisocial behaviour. This concurred with views from professionals and the local councillor:

If you look 5 years, 20 years back, we had youth clubs everywhere. Kids were kept occupied with sports activities and physical things. But there's no facilities left for kids. (Local Councillor)

A third-sector youth sports project successful in reducing antisocial behaviour explained that precarious Local Authority funding meant uncertainty about resuming work in the area. Local Authority participants talked about targeted youth diversion interventions to just those causing trouble. Financial constraints meant there was priority to youth outreach in build-up to big community events to reduce disorder, rather than providing a consistent service. Antisocial behaviour has been focal in community safety in mostly deprived neighbourhoods; however, it is not a top policing priority as associated crime is usually low level (Squires, 2017, p. 32).

Drug-related crime and CCTV. Associated severe violence was linked to drug-related crime, which concerned residents and the local councillor:

With drugs there is a relation to knife crime [...] we recently had a very serious incident where 5 young men were stabbed [...] we believe these are all drug related issues, this also gets into domestic issues and family breakdown, health inequalities and brings pressures on families. (Local Councillor)

Drugs are my concern. My kids are growing up and there are a lot of things going round here. The park is the main area. They go into the park and do these things and our kids are not safe. All youngsters are exposed to this [...] on the streets, in the park, on the road. (Mosque Attender)

The park, a notable hotspot for drug-related issues, had CCTV installation to gain intelligence of drug dealing, facilitating greater conviction levels:

[...] Since they [2 CCTV cameras] have gone up, people have been caught in the area with drugs. The amount of citizens who haven't had a decent night's sleep in years because of all of the chaos that have come to their doorstep and said this is the best move we have ever made. For the sake of £3,000 from the council's pot of money [...] people saying 'you and the council have done an excellent thing, I'm not afraid of my kids going out to play on the street anymore' [...] (Police 2)

Officers cared about residents and talked about taking it personally when crime occurred:

[. . .] we have massive pride in the area, as you should have if you work in an area long enough. So, when things get damaged, shop lifting happens, people take drugs and deal drugs, burglaries happen, you take it home with you at the end of the day. We all do [. . .] (Police 2)

CCTV instalment helped one part of the community feel safer, but police colleagues noted displacement of drug dealing to other parts of the neighbourhood previously unaffected. Displacement is a common outcome from CCTV instalment (Cerezo, 2013). Residents from other streets were now calling the police about drug dealing crimes, leading to swifter law enforcement outcomes. In the previous hot spot, drug crime was somewhat normalised, with fear of reprisal, which created reductions in reporting. Fear is understandable with Black (2021) reporting links between drugs and violence. CCTV installation broke the fear of reporting cycle. However, CCTV installation does not achieve reducing the demand of drugs, and there was no mention of increased therapeutic drug support in the community. Tackling drugs effectively requires both demand and supply to be addressed (ibid).

Community members were mostly pleased by the CCTV installations, but some young adults perceived additional surveillance as intrusive:

[. . .] where the playground was, there was a camera that positioned towards the community on the pretext of keeping people safe from drug dealers and so forth [. . .] the perception was that there was something more sinister going on [. . .] Even though it represents that it is making people feel more secure, that's not how it was perceived [. . .] that was mentioned to us more than once. (Community Organisation 1)

This could be indicative of generational attitude differences towards the police. Community members talked about those engaged in antisocial behaviour being disrespectful towards the police. The police acknowledge they had limited powers and needed to refer to the youth offending team for diversion activity, which was not an instant intervention. Disrespect for the police is exacerbated by the police being perceived as having no power to address issues:

The police walking around, they aren't the real police, they are PCSO's and they don't have enough powers. People don't fear the police anymore. The youngsters who are doing crime, they are involved in crime and think they will get away with it. That's why knife crime is on the increase. (Mosque Attender)

Community members said young people seemingly changed perspective on the police following positive interactions with an officer, and when they became adults with family responsibilities, they learnt the value of the police for community safety. In school settings, respect is apparent for the police at primary age, but this often diminishes in secondary education settings, particularly where drugs education is concerned (O'Connor, 2010). Residents in our study also experienced disrespect and felt unsafe when youths behaving disruptively congregated outside their properties.

Extremism and race hate concerns. The Local Authority was seemingly more concerned about radicalisation vulnerability than pressing community and police priority issues. The police were less concerned with terrorism crime rates, noting that when local suspected terrorists had been arrested and prosecuted, Muslim community members showed them appreciation and enquired about repercussions. Despite this care expressed to local officers, Muslim community members were less likely to report suspicions of extremism to the police due to interpersonal ties. Residents also commented that female Muslims were less likely to share intelligence about husbands involved in drug crime. The police also talked about occasionally having to safeguard ethnically diverse groups due to far-right extremism activity.

A local primary school felt able to identify parents possibly holding ideology akin with violent extremism. School leaders were involved in Local Authority-led Prevent Duty meetings, but wanted more *in situ* responsive support when issues emerged. The school leaders had solid experience of multi-cultural community practice that facilitates cohesion, and such knowledge was not being capitalised upon by other public and community sector partners.

Multi-cultural challenges. The police said it was sometimes difficult helping multi-cultural communities to understand what constituted as crime in the UK:

[...] There are 76 languages spoken in the area, each comes with a cultural clash and different expectations on what they can and can't do and that obviously impacts work across the Local Authority, police and the community. It is improving, but there is a way to go. (Police 2)

it's sometimes difficult when you are a service that isn't fully representative of the ethnic diversity in the community. In that sense it can be challenging at times to understand the different issues around culture issues and tradition. (Police 1)

Multi-cultural policing training was limited, so learning came from liaison with people, for example, Iman's. This built connections and provided opportunity for intelligence gaining and information dissemination. One police officer commented that law-abiding Iman's made efforts to share crime prevention information within the community, but some Iman's (known for previous crime involvement) were less effective. [Lai Quinlan et al. \(2013, p. 36\)](#) discuss the importance of community member credibility on addressing community security issues. In our study, credibility and non-reporting issues were apparent across all ethnic groups. Community members also questioned the credibility and corruptibility of the Local Authority because they felt that other neighbourhoods had swifter responses.

Study limitations

[McGee et al \(2022, p. 2\)](#) highlight that "local authorities are complex systems" that create political challenges for research collaborations. Political challenges were navigated sensitively but not eliminated. COVID-enforced lockdowns delayed analysis work and broke down Advisory Group connections due to organisational priority shifts focusing on the pandemic. A findings presentation to wider community members through world cafe methodology ([Brown and Issacs, 2005](#)) to enable additional knowledge and solution gathering was cancelled due to COVID restrictions.

Sample size was dictated by the research budget. While participant numbers are good for qualitative interviewing, generalisations are compromised because sections of the community were not included due to (1) language barriers, (2) ethical consent not covering young people and (3) time of day for interviewing limiting engagement for those working typical office hours. Snowball sampling can lead to bias within sample representation ([Marcus et al., 2017, p. 635](#)), so it was important to interview beyond the initial contact list from the Advisory Group. Despite reaching saturation ([Dworkin, 2012](#)) with findings, there were missing voices, and wide-ranging bilingual research team members may have assisted with us learning more about what was occurring in the community.

Conclusion

This research presents the provisional theory that regular public sector presence in the community, frequent communication and undertaking actions perceived important by community members are key trust building ingredients for effective partnership working to address community safety issues. Irregular communication, and inconsistent or delayed follow-up on community concerns, results in tensions between community members and the state. More research is needed to test this theory out ([Tilley and Sidebottom, 2017](#)) in other neighbourhoods. A contribution to knowledge is that community members are more likely to

wane in enthusiasm towards positive community activism when the state withdraws services from an area, rather than the governments anticipated outcome of community members taking greater ownership. Community members appreciated that austerity measures affected area outcomes, but at the same time noticed disparities regarding affluent areas seemingly receiving more public sector resources. Community members are committed partnership workers who require the state to visibly and to demonstrably engage.

There is mostly alignment between police and community member priorities, providing a sense of a common purpose. Community members mostly supported police intelligence gathering, although safety risks plus family and friendship ties create barriers for crime reporting. Engagement in intelligence gathering increased when fears of safety reduced via social media private text message reporting and when CCTV relocated a crime “hotspot”. Community members felt exhausted by consistent efforts to report drug dealing to the police and by reporting fly tipping to the Local Authority, with seemingly inadequate response. Where neighbourhoods have fly tipping and dilapidated buildings, broken windows theory was apparent (Wilson and Kelling, 1982) and presented a crime attraction, as well as increasing fear of crime (Hinkle and Yang, 2014). As a result, it is recommended that the Local Authority undertake more regular action to resolve environmental crime issues and listen more to community needs. Putting wasteland to productive usage, such as building a youth resource, could reduce youth antisocial behaviour. Consistent resourcing of youth services could help with positive attitudinal shifts, which would reduce hostility towards public services.

Local Authority pre-occupation with the anti-terrorism agenda was in contrast to police and community perceptions. While the local primary school were aware of possible families holding extremist ideology, partners were not capitalising on this intelligence and were also delayed in responding to school concerns regarding modern slavery. The police had made progress in building trusted ethnically diverse relationships, but the Local Authority was less engaged, missing opportunity to build relationship by supporting Mosque elders to access their place of worship safely. We recommend that the “cup of tea” model (Bahadur Lamb, 2013) be used by the Local Authority because small steps of humanity to the community will help to build bridges. Faith in state actors can be restored when professionals are consistently present, communicate and follow-up on actions as seen by the community police efforts discussed in this paper.

When there are community activists and guardians engaged in positive reform work, this needs to be celebrated and supported. Community activism has propensity for burnout and people becoming de-motivated. Capacity and capability building with “community guardians” (Shaw and McKay, 1942) would help to keep activism strong. Developing a network of community guardians across age ranges could benefit the community and lead to enhanced intelligence gathering. It could also provide a vehicle for community safety messages to reach the community. Creating communication feedback loops and using social media are important to maintain links with community partners. More work is needed in ensuring messages to the community are translated to various mother tongues to ensure inclusion. Greater efforts and resourcing could pay off in longer-term community safety and satisfaction.

Note

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