

BARRIERS TO COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN CRIME PREVENTION IN LOW INCOME COMMUNITIES IN CAPE TOWN

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Abstract

Community participation in crime prevention has been embraced by anti-crime organizations as a panacea for crime problems. This approach gained its preeminent status after governments realised that law enforcement alone cannot reduce crime without involving communities. This paper provides insight into challenges facing community participation in one of the Cape Town townships. The study employed qualitative method and participants such as ordinary citizens and representatives of anti-crime organizations operating in Khayelitsha were purposively selected. Data was collected using in-depth face-to-face interviews. Key findings show that Khayelitsha residents patrol streets during the night under a neighborhood watch project; and by reporting committed crimes to police or providing police with information on potential crimes, this same community patrol helps decrease potential criminal activities. Community participation in Khayelitsha however, faces some impediments such as poverty among the community residents, and ineffective police response to crimes.

Keywords: Community participation, crime, crime prevention, neighborhood watch, Khayelitsha township, Cape Town

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1. Introduction

Community participation in crime prevention activities is consistently gaining global ascendancy following high crime rates in many parts of the world engendered by ineffectiveness of law enforcement. The involvement of citizens in crime prevention is widely regarded as an ideal approach towards crime prevention and crime reduction. Community participation in crime prevention is grounded on the tenet that the traditional law enforcement cannot fight crime effectively without support from local communities who know their areas (Liebermann and Coulson 2004). It is in this context governments are actively mobilizing and integrating local communities into their crime prevention programmes in attempts to build strong collaboration between police and ordinary civilians.

Community participation in crime prevention regained its popularity in the 1970s (Newham 2005) and it is not a new phenomenon in community policing. Community participation in crime prevention has a long history. Literature indicates that the involvement of civilians in maintaining peace and security in their areas has been in practice since the time of the settlement of America where local communities were the first peace officers patrolling streets as volunteers. But this participation of civilians in crime prevention arena lost its hegemony in the mid-nineteenth century after the introduction of formal police officers (Ren et al. 2006) which rendered civilians into passive participants in finding solutions to crime problems in their communities.

In the early days of the introduction of formal police, it seemed that police was primed to become a panacea to crime problems since such formal police controlled and kept crime rates low. The situation changed unexpectedly when formal police started using technological devices in their operations: telecommunication devices such as radios, 911 emergency telephone systems, and vehicle patrols as a way of responding to people who were asking for help resulted increased crime rates. The high crime rates were attributed to the fact that police were handling crime problems from their offices in lieu of policing communities. This working method eroded the relationship between police officers and communities as police officers became estranged from troubled communities (Fleissner and Heinzelmann 1996).

It is argued that the participation of local communities in crime prevention activities is justifiable since they know their crime problems and localities better than outsiders from their communities. In fact, community participation is grounded on this tenet of local communities' familiarity (Liebermann and Coulson 2004). It is only in this way that police could become productive if they collaborate with local communities. Without this collaboration, police officers are clueless strangers about major criminal activities taking place in specific communities. In the same vein, Friedman (1998) postulates that it was ordinary citizens who contributed to the decrease in crime high rates in the 1990s in the United States of America. It is therefore argued here that police performance in deterring criminal activities correlates with the level at which local communities are involved and participate in crime prevention activities.

One of the advantages of community participation in crime prevention activities is that it allows ordinary citizens to become co-

producers of public safety along with the police. This makes the implementers of community participation model in crime prevention activities assume that the model stimulates an environment in which both ordinary citizens and police share responsibilities of improving and maintaining public safety (Pattavina et al. 2006). On the other hand, Zhao et al. (2002) posit that governments regard the participation of local communities in policing as an effective way of compensating for the scarcity of financial and human resources given that this approach puts emphasis on voluntarism. Still on the benefits of community participation in crime prevention, Botterill and Fisher (2002) also point out that involving local communities in crime prevention programmes mobilises more human resources than could be done by government alone. Although community participation contributes to minimising expenditure on crime prevention programmes, local communities still have to be fully empowered with relevant skills and resources that would enable them to participate effectively.

The level at which community members are willing to participate in crime prevention programmes is influenced by context and social organization. Communities that share common understandings and values are more willing to achieve common interests, including maintaining safety and order (Carcach and Huntley 2002, Fagan and Mearns, 2008). According to Sampson and Groves (1989), social organization is reflection of the capacity for a community to self-regulate. It could be argued therefore that social organization is a prerequisite for a community to achieve meaningful participation in crime prevention programmes.

However, social organization does not always yield effective community participation as the willingness of community members to participate in crime prevention programmes may be hindered by

factors other than social disorganization. These factors include fear of crime among community members, demographic profile of the community and community members' perceptions of local government agencies (Ren et al. 2006). Yet, studies carried out by Sherman (2002) and Kane (2005) also reveal that community members' perceptions of local police and other government institutions in their communities also have colossal influence on community members' decisions to volunteer in crime prevention programmes. Poor relationships with police and lack of trust in the police impinge on community participation in crime prevention. Poor community participation based on lack of trust in the police, however, may be understandably and justifiable because no-one would be willing to collaborate with untrusted partners. In line with this argument, one study revealed that positive perceptions of community policing were strong correlated to increases in crime prevention behaviour (Scheider et al. 2003).

In the South African context, the participation of local communities in crime prevention is in its infancy because the approach only became popular in the country after the demise of apartheid in 1994. During apartheid, crime rates were very high across the black and colored communities but fighting and preventing crime in non-white occupied communities was not on the government's agenda. The apartheid government was committed to preventing criminal activities in white-occupied communities, and it concentrated resources and police in mainly these communities to ensure they remain unaffected by criminal activities which were prevalent in black-occupied communities (Shaw 2002).

In post-apartheid South Africa, the promotion and support of community participation in anti-crime activities was manifested in numerous policies formulated towards crime prevention, and these

policies require collaboration between police and local communities. The establishment of community policing forum (CPF) in 1995 for example, sent a strong message to South Africans and the international community that the post-apartheid government was committed to embracing and consolidating community participation in crime prevention programmes. The formation of the CPF aims at enhancing police visibility in the community, full community participation, and creating a sense of ownership. This organization is a legislative body formed in accordance with the South African Police Service Act 68 of 1995. The Act requires police stations to work closely with communities through community policing forums (RSA 1995).

The participation of local communities was also endorsed in other anti-crime policies that succeeded the establishment of the CPF. In the National Crime Prevention Strategy developed in 1996 (RSA 1996), community participation was one of the four-pillar approach to crime prevention strategy (Newham 2005). Community participation was also placed at the core of the South African Police Service's (SAPS) own in-house policy on crime prevention which is known as the national crime combating strategy (NCCS) developed in 2000 in response to crime which was increasing at alarming rates in the country (SAPS 2002). In this policy, the SAPS acknowledged the role of local communities in fighting and preventing crime and placed them at the forefront in the policy implementation which intended to achieve the following broad objectives:

(i) to restore public confidence in the police and encourage community participation; and (ii) to reduce crime in particular areas through policing (SAPS 2002).

Although the South African government implemented these comprehensive policies on crime prevention and has consistently

been increasing expenditure on fighting crime (RSA 1998, Mbola 2009, Leuvenink, 2015), there is substantial evidence that the crime situation in South Africa is still frightening (Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) 2009, Leuvenink 2015, OSAC 2015). This failure of the crime prevention policies is linked to factors such as long-standing allegations of an ineffective and corrupt South African Police Service (Shaw 1996, Singh 2005, Faull 2007, Faull 2011), including scarce resources in major anti-crime organizations such as the SAPS and CPF (Pelser 1999). However, crime rates are very high in big cities such as Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg (Lancaster 2013, OSAC 2014) but the most affected communities are those occupied by black people such as Khayelitsha (Achmat 2014). This paper provides insight into challenges impeding community participation in crime prevention in low income communities Cape Town metropolitan.

2. Methodology

The study was conducted in Khayelitsha, one of the townships in Cape Town metropolitan jurisdiction.¹ The selection of this community was motivated by its current high crime situation. This community is among the crime hot-spots in Cape Town (City of Cape Town 2009) and in the country. Khayelitsha is characterised by overcrowded and unplanned informal houses, few and narrow streets which some have poor and often limited street lights whilst others have no lights at all.

This study used a qualitative research design and data was collected from various categories of participants from different anti-crime organizations and community residents. The participants were 45

¹ In South Africa, township is a suburb or a small town officially designed by apartheid for black Africans.

including: 6 community leaders (2 ward councilors and 4 street committee members), 33 community residents, and 6 representatives of anti-crime organizations such as Khayelitsha Security and Safety Forum, Khayelitsha Development Forum (KDF), Community Policing Forum (CPF), the South African National Civic Organization (SANCO), and the South African Police Service (SAPS). This sample size was arrived at through data saturation. Data saturation suggests that researchers stop collecting data when the point of data saturation is reached. The point of data saturation is reached when there is evident redundancy or replication in information collected from participants in research (Simon 2011, Marshall et al. 2013). The point of data saturation in this study was reached at the 45th participant.

The selection of participants was done using a purposive sampling method. The preference of purposive sampling method was based on its advantage which is to allow a researcher to choose participants who are assumed to possess and provide invaluable information to the research question (Guarte and Barrios 2006). In addition, the method provides a researcher with the flexibility in determining the kind of information to be known and how to get this information (Bernard 2002). This implies that the researcher in this study had the flexibility in selecting participants who assumed to possess invaluable and relevant information to address research questions.

The data collection tool used in this study was in-depth face-to-face interviews with all 45 participants. The purpose and objectives of this research were explained to each participant so that they take informed decisions on whether to participate in the study or not. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the interview process at any stage. They were also informed that the interviews would be recorded but the researcher assured the

participants that inputs would be handled with high level of confidentiality and that their names would remain anonymous. After data collection the recorded interviews were transcribed and printed out so the researcher can read them and glean themes and patterns. Then the researcher identified connections within and between themes to explain effects and relationships within and between themes.

3. Findings and discussion

Community participation in crime prevention in Khayelitsha community takes two dimensions: on one hand, there are organized groups of residents who voluntarily patrol streets during the night in collaboration with armed police officers. These volunteers are recruited and managed by the community policing forum (CPF) under the project known as neighborhood watch. On the other hand, residents participate in crime prevention as police informants by supplying police with leading information about crimes already committed or potential crimes. These two approaches to community participation in crime prevention and the challenges communities face are presented and discussed in the next sections.

3.1 Challenges facing neighborhood watch project

The collaboration between residents and police in crime prevention activities is grounded on the South African Police Service Act 68 of 1995 which stipulates that the CPF has to work hand in hand with police officers (RSA 1995). This means that neighborhood watch members patrol streets only when they are with police officers as affirmed by the interviewed police officer who posits that neighborhood watch members are not advised to patrol streets without police officers because they are untrained and unarmed

civilians. Therefore, should they patrol streets on their own volition, it would be risking their lives because they may be trekked and attacked by armed criminals. If neighborhood watch members are available to work, they have to liaise with Khayelitsha Police Station Commander on time so that the commander allocates police officers to work with them.

When neighborhood watch members fail to communicate with the police station commander, police officers are often deployed to other areas where are needed. However, there are incidents when the schedules of the neighborhood watch members are disrupted by the unavailability of police officers at Khayelitsha Police Station, not because the neighborhood watch failed to communicate their availability timely but because of shortage of police officers. In fact, the shortage of police officers was identified as one of the major impediments to community participation in Khayelitsha. One interviewed representative of the CPF lamented that sometimes volunteers do not work due to lack of police officers with whom to work along. The interviewed police officer argues that this often happens when police officers are deployed to areas where they are urgently needed in Khayelitsha.

Botterill and Fisher (2002) argue that involving local communities in programmes such as crime prevention enhances the capacity of participants to address crime problems on their own without relying on external elements. The main challenge facing many anti-crime organizations including those in Khayelitsha, however, is to mobilise local communities so that they participate voluntarily in collaborative activities to achieve common interests. Findings of this study show that the CPF struggles to recruit volunteers into crime prevention activities. The representative of the CPF disclosed that many residents are not willing to join neighborhood watch. A large

proportion of the participants also brazenly affirmed that volunteering for street patrol is not any of their options and that they do not intend joining neighborhood watch even though they all appreciate the work such neighborhood watch does in their areas.

This challenge, related to unwillingness to participate in crime prevention activities, results in a shortage of volunteers in neighborhood watch groups, which leads to the reduction of working nights a week. According to one representative of the CPF, neighborhood watch members work only three nights (Friday, Saturday, and Sunday) over weekend because this is the time when criminal activities are at their peak. The participant added that they would work all seven nights if they had enough volunteers.

Another barrier related to community participation is the alleged corruption and ineffectiveness of the criminal justice system and its components, including the SAPS. This was proffered by a sizeable proportion of the participants, residents in particular during the interviews. These allegations however, are stale and commonplace in the South African criminal justice system as evident in extensive literature (Shaw 1996, Brown 2001, Singh 2005, Faull 2007, Faull 2011). In this study, residents made these allegations based on the numerous occasions on which police released crime suspects without charges or when police are called for help by residents but police arrive at the crime scene too late to apprehend the criminals. Without doubt, the alleged poor performance of police in Khayelitsha affects community participation of the policing and justice system negatively. It discourages residents from joining neighborhood watch groups. There are even people who refrained from patrolling Khayelitsha streets due to corruption and perceived poor performance of the police. One participant testified that he had stopped patrolling streets after the police had released a crime

suspect who had been caught in the night with a stolen DVD player and cell phone. The crime suspect was caught during the night and was locked in the police's vehicle. In the morning around 05:00 am the suspect was released and the police never even asked him to prove whether the DVD player and cellphone belong to him.

The interviewed police officer admitted that crime suspects are sometimes released without charges but the release only happens when there is no concrete evidence to prosecute the suspect. However, the police officer urged people to provide evidence when making such allegations because some allegations are groundless. The police added that many allegations are made by people who have little or no knowledge about the functions of the criminal justice system. It was emphasized that the work of police is not to arrest crime suspects, take them to court and instruct the court about verdicts and decisions to take as many people may think. Instead, the work of police is to arrest a crime suspect, gather relevant evidence, do all requisite administrative work, put the gathered information in a docket, and eventually send the docket to court. The police's work ends there. This implies that police have no influence on whatsoever decision is ultimately taken in court. To improve residents' attitude and perceptions towards police arguably requires much effort. Police have to render quality service, and residents have to become knowledgeable about the police's jurisdiction. Otherwise police in Khayelitsha will continue to be accused of corruption even though the allegation that police is corrupt is not new phenomenon in South Africa. Police have been accused of releasing crime suspects on bail-out without being prosecuted (Singh 2005).

As Sampson and Groves (1989) argue that poor communities hardly participate in collaborative activities to achieve common interests. Poverty was also cited by a large proportion of participants as a

factor that adversely affects the participation of residents in crime prevention activities in Khayelitsha. The participants stated that they cannot volunteer while they struggle to put food on the table for their starving families. This argument therefore, indicates that poor residents would rather get involved in work that is likely to bring tangible and economic benefits. The poverty in Khayelitsha impedes community participation in crime prevention and this was also confirmed by the representative of the CPF who stated that the majority of Khayelitsha residents are poor and one has to motivate them with some regular stipend so that they participate in crime prevention activities.

Still on poverty, findings also indicate that property ownership has influence over residents' decisions to participate in crime prevention programmes. Residents with little or no property are more reluctant to patrol streets than those who own the properties. A sizable number of participants, particularly young people, brazenly revealed that they have no reason to patrol streets or participate in other anti-crime activities since they have no properties or anything valuable to protect. On the same token, one participant sees patrolling streets as protecting a few wealthy individuals with their property. He said "we patrol streets in cold nights while rich people are sleeping". As a result, he decided to not participate in patrolling streets.

Local communities contribute considerably to police performance through the supply of information on committed or potential criminal activities. Crime reduction may not be actualised if police are not supplied with information that may lead to the deterrence of criminal activities, and such information can only be from the communities in which crime is perpetrated. Findings of this study indicate that there are residents, including crime victims, who are unwilling to inform on and report crimes to police due to fear of being victimised by

criminals. This anxiety and fear also discourages some residents from engaging in any form of anti-crime surveillance activities. More than half of the interviewed residents revealed that they fear participating in anti-crime activities or providing police with information about criminal activities because criminals may victimise them. This victimization of police informants is because they are seen by criminals as sell-outs. One young man said that he could not even intervene if he saw a person being robbed. He narrated “...if I see a person is being attacked I would rather continue with what I am going or stand aside and watch as a spectator. Criminals would hunt you down for revenge if you intervene.”

3.2 Challenges facing the police-residents collaboration efforts

The work of the police would be difficult without the support of local communities who possess information about their area and criminal activities taking place in it (Fleissner and Heinzelmann 1996). It is in this context the interviewed police officer urged residents to work with police through providing information about criminal activities taking place in their areas. This call for collaboration between police and local communities is due to the fact that residents in Khayelitsha are reluctant to provide police with information related to criminal activities as discussed earlier, and the participant emphasized that informing police about potential crimes and reporting committed crimes to police is only a salutary gesture towards crime reduction in Khayelitsha. Like in previous studies conducted in South Africa whose findings revealed that many South Africans have lost faith in the SAPS (Shaw 1996, Brown 2001, Faull 2011), the police officer disclosed that residents are reluctant to inform police about crimes because of mistrust and lack of confidence in police officers. This was echoed by twenty-two participants who believe that police and

the whole criminal justice system is corrupt.

The participants equate reporting crimes to police with time-wasting given that a number of the reported crime cases go uninvestigated. One street committee member furiously expressed how disappointed he was when police refused to investigate his case opened at Khayelitsha Police Station. The street committee member narrated:

...one day I was not at home and people broke into my house and stole my belongings. After a couple of days my neighbor saw a person selling some of my belongings and she called me. I reported the suspect to the police station. My case was just filed and police never bothered making any follow up on the case.

This poor service delivery by police has a negative impact on the relationship between police and residents as affirmed by a police officer who revealed that some residents regard police as enemies instead of people who are mandated to protect them [residents]. Arguably, this weak and fragile relationship results in poor collaboration between police and residents in crime prevention activities because effective collaboration requires a high level of trust and understanding between partners. On the same token, studies found that communities with poor relationship with local police are unlikely to volunteer in crime prevention programmes (Sherman 2000, Kane 2005).

4. Conclusion

Community participation in crime prevention activities has undoubtedly potential in reducing crime given that crimes are committed by community members who are sometimes known by their neighbors. However, problems such as poverty and ineffectiveness of the SAPS which have been identified as major

deterrents to effective community participation in Khayelitsha have to be first addressed if reducing crime is to be achieved in Khayelitsha. The fact that community participation in crime prevention activities is grounded on volunteerism, people with low income who struggle to put food on the table for their families are unlikely to participate in crime prevention which is unpaid work. They are interested in participating in work that is likely to bring economic benefits. For people in low income communities to participate in crime prevention activities have to be motivated with economic benefits.

Restoration of public trust and faith in the SAPS is urgently needed for Khayelitsha residents to effectively participate in crime prevention activities. The number of Khayelitsha residents reporting crimes committed and providing police with information about potential criminal activities will continue to decline as long as Khayelitsha residents still perceive police unhelpful and corrupt people. Effective partnership between police and citizens in crime prevention activities is built around trust and faith citizens have in the police.

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