Neighbourhood coordination ‘light’. On the tension between proximity and distance in the relationship between the police and the citizens.

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English Summary

Introduction

The circumstances under which Western police organizations operate have changed dramatically over roughly the last half century. Safety became an urgent issue for society and politics alike, due to sharply rising crime rates, increasing complexity of crime and new dangers, like the threat of terrorism. Police involvement changed from its traditional position – mainly fighting crime – to the much broader perspective of enhancing safety. The task thus expanded from crime fighting to peace keeping to combating disorder and feelings of unsafety. Consequently, the police have become one of many players in the field of safety and security, due to the high crime levels and the ever-increasing demand for safety.

Furthermore, police organizations themselves have changed considerably during the same period. A relatively simple executive organization has changed into a complex professional institution that tries to exert an influence on the equally changed circumstances in society. However, the fact that policing involves an internal paradox remains unchanged. On the one hand good policing requires proximity to the citizenry; while on the other hand it calls for the maintenance of a certain distance. Policing needs to be up close to know about the problems people experience in their everyday life and how to address them. At the same time, policing requires distance to be maintained to enable police officers to safeguard public interests and to intervene if necessary (Cachet & Versteegh, 2007).

The police force has faced criticism of its performance, resulting in a need to improve it again and again. In the Netherlands this criticism also addresses the recurrent discrepancy between what the police do and what people want, and the equally recurrent issue of the force’s lack of success in reducing crime and disorder. Disapproval of excessively harsh police operations switches to disapproval of overly mild police work, and vice versa. Furthermore, when criminality finally stabilized, with crime rates even decreasing in some specific areas, public feelings of unsafety nonetheless continued to climb (Bastiaenen & Vriesema, 1981; Van der Vijver & Zoomer, 2004; Terpstra & Kouwenhoven, 2004; Punch, et al., 2007; Cachet & Versteegh, 2007; Fijnaut, 2007b; Terpstra, 2008).

Western countries responded to this criticism by implementing an ongoing programme of community policing, thus attempting to provide a more adequate police performance. This strategy was supposed to address the gap between the police and the public and to advance police effectiveness in terms of safety improvement (Hartnett & Skogan, 1999; Skogan, 2006; Fung, 2004).
research problem
Although the Dutch police had emphasized proximity to the citizenry as early as the 1970s, especially by the implementation of community policing, recent police practice is moving to a more remote position from the citizenry. As a consequence, community policing has come under pressure (Das et al., 2007). This research focuses specifically on a particular design of community policing by the Amsterdam-Amstelland police, called neighbourhood coordination [buurtregie]. Neighbourhood coordination involves the same elements as the Dutch area-bound policing, with certain additional elements. In addition to proximity, the use of preventive and proactive strategies as well as reactive ones, cooperating with other agencies and mobilizing citizens (Terpstra, 2008, 2009), the Amsterdam neighbourhood coordinator is held responsible for safety and security in his neighbourhood and he is expected to coordinate cooperation with other agencies and citizens.

In this way, the neighbourhood coordinator would appear to be pivotal in achieving a balance between proximity and distance from people within his own function and in relation to the actions of the rest of the police organization. The aim of this research is to ascertain how the police attempts to get closer to citizens through neighbourhood coordination and how the people experience the relationship between the police and the citizenry. The research provides a diagnosis of neighbourhood coordination: how does it work and which aspects could be improved? This leads to the following central research question: does neighbourhood coordination bring the police closer to the citizenry?

Community policing and neighbourhood coordination
According to Skogan (2006), community policing has three core elements: citizen involvement, problem solving and decentralization. Citizen involvement is about discovering and responding to citizens’ problems and involving citizens in their solution. A problem-oriented approach is concerned with using local knowledge, expansion of the policing mandate and cooperation with other agencies in solving problems. Finally, decentralization aims at the devolution of authority and responsibility to lower levels in the police hierarchy – to local police chiefs of a police ward and individual police officers in a police neighbourhood. This is intended to advance and facilitate rapid determination and response to local problems with locally tailored solutions.

However, implementation of these three core elements has proved difficult. Community policing is often criticized because it is only partially implemented in practice, and is thus seen as flawed. Consequently, the accusation is often laid that community policing consists mostly of rhetoric. Nevertheless, Fung’s (2004) case studies of the rather extensive implementation of community policing in the American city of Chicago demonstrate that citizen involvement can be organized with a limited number of citizens, that it can lead to police-citizen cooperation and thus to a reduction of the gap between police and citizens.

In the Netherlands community policing was implemented first of all by the introduction of community policing officers [wijkagenten], followed by police ward teams [wijkteams] and then area-bound police officers [gebiedsgebonden politiefunctionarissen]. The trail-blazing police report A Changing Police [Politie in Verandering] (Projectgroep
organisatie structuren (1977) was a milestone for these changes in Dutch policing, as it pleaded for far-reaching integration of the police into society. Simultaneously, integral safety policy developed in the Netherlands. Crime had risen to such an extent from the ’eighties on that it became necessary to set priorities and create policy. The authorities came to realize that police and judicial authorities could no longer deal with crime on their own and had to cooperate with other parties, including the citizenry. This resulted in so-called security networks, wherein local area-bound policing officers usually represented the police.

Nowadays the Dutch variant of community policing, which was developed in a strong welfare state with a mild approach to criminality and punishment, has been under pressure for some time. The tolerant, friendly, social policing style has been under criticism by citizens and politicians since the early ’nineties, as it was thought that Dutch tolerance had gone too far, creating a counterproductive effect. After the turn of the century, terrorist assaults in the West and two political murders in the Netherlands led to a further shift of police attention towards criminal investigation, counterterrorism and law enforcement. The Netherlands of the 21st century is characterized by a hardened security policy and a move towards a focus on punishment and centralization.

Despite that, the Dutch police force has explicitly chosen to continue the area-bound policing strategy. It emphasizes the importance of societal integration as a result of increased social tensions along lines of race, descent and religion. However, realising the community policing ideals in practice has had limited success in the Netherlands, too. Emergency help often dominates the planning and perception of police basic ward units, which limits the room available for and commitment to area-bound policing. None of the 25 police regions has achieved the target situation of area-bound policing as a concept for the entire organization; it remains relatively restricted to the area-bound police officers (Straver et al., 2008).

The position of neighbourhood coordinator was formally introduced in the Amsterdam-Amstelland police in the year 2000. This position is characterized by a higher rank, a substantial additional training programme and considerable responsibility, namely the coordination of the safety and habitability of the neighbourhood to which the officer is assigned. Ten years of experience with neighbourhood coordination and some complaints about it being too permissive have led to the formulation of a new vision of neighbourhood coordination. In the course of 2010 the Amsterdam-Amstelland police decided to introduce more focus into neighbourhood coordination, by extending the ‘safer neighbourhood’ and ‘safer school’ teams’ pilot projects and by implementing the ‘prominenten’ approach through the whole police region.

This vision entails a greater emphasis on focus by making neighbourhood coordinators chose ten relevant, concrete local neighbourhood problems which they call the ‘prominenten’. The idea is to choose these problems and make them explicit for each neighbourhood, then to use them as a focus for the whole police ward. Neighbourhood coordinators will then be held accountable for progress in tackling these problems, as will be their chiefs (Meurs, 2010: 30, 31). This ‘prominenten’ approach is to be implemented throughout the whole Amsterdam-Amstelland police region during 2010 and 2011. Only one of the research police wards had started working according to this method during the fieldwork for this research. Thus this research mainly reveals the police’s way of working prior to the implementation of the ‘prominenten’ approach.
The neighbourhood coordinator is the area-bound police officer of the Amsterdam-Amstelland police and is responsible for coordinating safety and habitability in one of the 236 neighbourhoods. Every neighbourhood coordinator belongs to one of the 32 police ward teams, where he or she reports directly to the police ward chief. The police wards work with flexible schedules to adjust police input as much as possible to the demands on police services. Furthermore, the police is information-led, which enables neighbourhood coordinators to apply for police ward personnel to work on specific problems in their neighbourhood. Unfortunately, Amsterdam-Amstelland police wards have been short of personnel for years, which make them highly dependent on the input of flexible police officers, often officers who are still in training.

Moreover, the demand on neighbourhood coordinators to carry out certain extra tasks in service of programmes that operate across the entire police corps has increased. In addition, neighbourhood coordinators have repeatedly been used for de-escalation during periods of tension after serious incidents. Recent Dutch research confirms that this de-escalating approach works with area-bound policing in general, but it also shows that the amount of time area-bound police officers can actually spend in their neighbourhood is limited, as they spend on average no more than 65 per cent of their net time on neighbourhood-related work.

**Method**

This research has been conducted by a combination of document analysis and qualitative interviews of neighbourhood coordinators, their chiefs, citizens and key contacts, and has been completed with a small number of observations. The literature analysis gives special attention to the rise of community policing and the context within which it developed, namely the changing field of safety and security. The policy document analysis focused on the organizational context of neighbourhood coordination. By combining this organizational context of neighbourhood coordination with the eight dimensions of the changing field of safety and distance in neighbourhood coordination was developed. The model provides two aspects that potentially lead to closer proximity to citizens and two aspects that potentially lead to greater distance from citizens for each dimension of neighbourhood coordination. All interviews were semi-structured, in line with this model.

In total, 50 semi-structured interviews and seven observation sessions were held from August 2009 to December 2010. These involved four inquiry interviews and 24 in-depth interviews with police officers on the one hand, and four inquiry interviews and 24 in-depth interviews with citizens and key contacts on the other hand. The research was conducted in seven police wards, one in Amsterdam North, three in Amsterdam Southeast, and three in Amsterdam West. Two neighbourhoods were chosen in each police ward, all with a multi-ethnic population and multilateral problems. The police chief and two neighbourhood coordinators per police ward were interviewed first, after which an observation session took place.
place in one neighbourhood of each police ward. In each of these seven neighbourhoods three non-police respondents were also interviewed.

**Low threshold contact and little citizen involvement**

The research shows that proximity manifests itself within neighbourhood coordination through a combination of low-threshold contact and little citizen involvement. All the respondents endorse the ideal of proximity, but in everyday practice this desired proximity remains relatively limited. Both aspects of proximity are under pressure and citizen involvement in particular is still very far from matching the community policing ideal.

The research reveals five substantial factors that impede proximity to citizens. First, low-threshold contact and citizen involvement both demand the maximum physical presence of the neighbourhood coordinator in the neighbourhood, but the time available for this is decreasing. Second, neighbourhood coordinators experience numerous difficulties in deploying their own colleagues on neighbourhood problems, while neighbourhood coordination was intended to focus the police organization on neighbourhood problems. Third, the information predominantly follows a path from citizens to the police. The citizens, however, also want to get information from the police. Fourth, police chiefs do not direct citizen involvement. Fifth, there is a clash of cultures; hierarchical structures within the police relate badly to the horizontal networking of neighbourhood coordinators.

Some neighbourhood coordinators do achieve wider citizen involvement in their neighbourhood despite these obstacles. This usually involves small-scale cooperation with a select group of active citizens or with separate, individual active citizens. Local entrepreneurs are more often involved in actually prioritizing and addressing problems in cooperation with the police. Broad citizen involvement is enhanced by close cooperation between neighbourhood coordinator, local outreach workers and some active citizens, tangible support for citizens from the neighbourhood coordinator, structural deliberation with citizens – which involves discussing problems and possible solutions – having citizens play a part of their own, and structural feedback to citizens about actions and the results achieved.

However, this research shows that police ward chiefs mainly emphasize solving problems by using the professional network, not by encouraging citizen involvement. But even this way of problem-oriented working with professional partners has its flaws. To be able to carry through structural solutions, neighbourhood coordinators generally depend on actions by professional partners, but these partners do not always satisfactorily execute their part of the approach. According to neighbourhood coordinators, these situations in particular require strong coordination skills, as well as a certain amount of support from their own organization, which is often inadequate.

As is the case with citizen involvement, the way neighbourhood coordinators are managed and directed by police ward chiefs does not involve a focus on how to achieve a problem-oriented approach, put together a relevant network of neighbourhood contacts, influence other agencies without formal power, and determine what support the police ward should provide. For instance, arrangements made by neighbourhood coordinators with partners for solving a neighbourhood problem do not lead the police ward management to
decide to employ police ward personnel on neighbourhood problems. Thus, two important elements of neighbourhood coordination – citizen involvement and a problem-oriented approach – have not yet emerged sufficiently in the practice of neighbourhood coordination. 

*Neighbourhood coordination ‘light’*

According to the community policing ideal, proximity to citizens can be achieved by a combination of citizen involvement, a problem-oriented approach, and decentralization. Large-scale citizen involvement as envisaged in community policing has not been found within neighbourhood coordination and should be considered unrealistic. The police are not favourably disposed to collective citizen involvement; in fact even the majority of the few active citizens would rather confine themselves to participating only by prioritizing problems. In their view, actually doing something about these problems is a task for the police.

Nevertheless, small-scale citizen involvement is important, especially for citizens from disadvantaged areas, and could be improved if the police were to put more effort into it. Where proximity to citizens is concerned, low-threshold contact in particular turned out to be a success factor, in which proper treatment of citizens plays an important part. In the end, the citizens’ judgment is not primarily influenced by the outcome of the police intervention, but by the extent to which they perceive that the neighbourhood coordinator has respected them, has actually listened to them, has done everything possible to help solve their problem and has informed them honestly about that.

Besides citizen involvement, community policing requires decentralization and a problem-oriented approach, which in turn requires devolution of authority and responsibility to lower levels in the police hierarchy, to advance and facilitate rapid determination and response to local problems with locally tailored solutions (Skogan, 2006: 37). Citizens, however, observe that the options available to the neighbourhood coordinator to employ his/her own organization or professional partners on neighbourhood problems are limited.

Neighbourhood coordinators are confronted with a great deal of sometimes conflicting demands from citizens, managers, colleagues and professional partners. Often this involves situations that require swift action now or in the immediate future. In particular, the constant disruption by all kinds of ad-hoc tasks, and prioritization of the police organization on goals unrelated to the neighbourhood, makes it difficult to engage in a more thorough and neighbourhood-related analysis.

Indeed, the ‘prominenten’ approach offers a first impulse to improve the problem-oriented approach and connect it more closely with the neighbourhood, but as yet it provides no guarantee for citizen involvement. Furthermore, the extra support neighbourhood coordinators in particular need as they attempt to adopt a neighbourhood-related approach that truly fits in with what citizens want, is by and large unavailable. Moreover, the majority of citizen respondents interviewed for the present research feel that the police and the authorities do not pay a great deal of attention to citizens’ ideas and input.

The present research has shown that both police and citizens can see a lack of citizen involvement, while it is entirely clear that both desire improved proximity between the police and the citizenry. Most citizen respondents do not have unrealistic expectations about the
police, but they do demand a certain degree of transparency and recognition. They want to know what they can expect from the police and if results have been achieved, but also if results have fallen short of expectations, and if the police have made mistakes. Most citizen respondents are themselves involved in advancing safety and habitability in their neighbourhood, but wish that police and the local administration would grant them more space to do so.

Community policing in its most ideal form is impracticable, but a light version is feasible. Problem-oriented working in small-scale partnerships with a limited number of active citizens and professionals, combined with a low-threshold presence of the neighbourhood coordinator in which proper treatment of citizens plays an important role is a real possibility. Such community policing ‘light’, or neighbourhood coordination ‘light’, is better than no community policing at all. So community policing succeeds, but with a limited number of people who have a great degree of commitment to the neighbourhood. Neighbourhood coordination ‘light’ is realistic and important to counteract the growing trend of increasing distance from the citizenry.

**Recommendations**

(1) Anchor mini-coalitions
The first recommendation is to anchor the involvement of a relatively small group of active citizens in a mini-coalition. This can be achieved by introducing carefully structured alliances between the neighbourhood coordinator and a select group of neighbourhood outreach workers and active citizens. Furthermore, as the ‘prominenten’ approach comes to be implemented throughout the whole Amsterdam police organization, at least three of these ‘prominenten’ should be chosen with the participation of these locally active citizens.

(2) Organize better support
The second recommendation is to organize better support of neighbourhood coordination by the police organization, both from the neighbourhood’s own police ward and from the central organization. Having the police ward chiefs direct the process of community policing, putting together an internal network for the neighbourhood coordinator, a set division of networking tasks between police ward project leaders and neighbourhood coordinators, and a simple measure such as the weekly provision of crime record analyses to the neighbourhood coordinator, would provide them with more time for the neighbourhood and more support from their own police ward. In addition, a form of central support should focus on facilitating and improving small-scale, regular deliberation between citizens and the police at the neighbourhood level, the joint setting of priorities, and approaches in the form of monthly neighbourhood panels.

(3) Optimize the provision of information
A third recommendation is to optimize the provision of information by continuous feedback of action taken and results achieved to citizens in the community. This study shows that people not only want to provide information to the police, but also that they expect
information to be fed back to them much more often and of much better quality than is currently the case. This has a great influence on the citizens’ confidence in the police, and the same holds for their willingness to cooperate with the police. It is essential that actions and the results achieved are fed back to the citizens in a more structured manner.

References

