Community Policing in The Hague

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Security in The Hague

The Hague is not only the seat of the Dutch government and parliament, but also the host to several important international organisations in the area of justice and security (e.g. the International Court of Justice, International Criminal Court, the OPCW: the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons). The city is keen to portray a strong image as the leading city when it comes to peace, justice and security. Apart from this international orientation, The Hague is also the third largest city in The Netherlands with a population of 515.880 inhabitants[1]. Almost half of the population are immigrants, from a wide range of different parts of the world. This mix of people makes for a lively atmosphere, but it also involves certain challenges. Some of the city's neighbourhoods are known for the problems with tensions between ethnic minorities or clashes between residents from different socio-economic backgrounds. Criminal youth groups and domestic burglaries are some of the other priorities for the police and municipality when it comes to neighbourhood security and liveability.

Skyline of the Hague. Photographer: Christopher A. Dominic - http://www.flickr.com/photos/36698062@N05/8145592943

In recent years, the participation of civilians in security issues has gained much ground in The Netherlands. The government strategy in 2002 'Towards a more secure society' (Ministerie van Binnelandse Zaken en Koningkrijkrelaties & Ministerie van Justitie, 2002) marks the shift towards a focus on the perception of security among citizens, in addition to a focus on reducing objective security incidents. Since then, national policies increasingly aim to target those types of crimes that have a large impact on people, the so-called *high impact crimes.* In addition to a shift in focus, there has also been a growing trend to involve citizens in targeting the problems in their own living areas, including security issues.

In line with the developments at the national level, the city of The Hague has explicitly formulated an ambition in their most recent strategic security plan to expand the deployment of neighbourhood watch teams in the city. The aim that was formulated for the strategy period between 2012-2015 was to have 35 teams active by the end of 2014 (Gemeente Den Haag, 2012). Already in the fall of 2014, there were 41 active neighbourhood watch teams. This ambition stems from an integrated approach, developed by the research department of the regional Police, based on three main principles: problem-oriented policing, intelligence-led policing and community policing. The

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[1]As of 1-1-2015. Source: http://www.denhaag.buurtmonitor.nl/

approach of working together with different partners to fight specific problems, based on data analyses, in addition to the active participation of local citizens combines the strengths of three types of policing approaches that have been extensively researched and evaluated. The core idea behind this 'Best of Three Worlds' approach (Versteegh, Van der Plas & Nieuwstraten, 2010) is that the combination of these principles yields the best results when fighting high-impact crimes such as burglaries. In other words, more effective policing could be achieved by focussing on "*hot crimes, hot spots, hot shots & hot groups*" (Versteegh, et al., 2010: 3). Research shows that citizens' active participation in the approach to high frequency offences clearly contributes to decreasing crime rates. Citizens contribute to the observing and solving capacity of the police and in turn, the active participation increases citizens' level of trust in the Police. Together this results in a higher rate of offenders caught in the act and a higher prevention rate.

In this paper we present an empirical case of the implementation of community policing in a specific neighbourhood in The Hague, Spoorwijk. This example is an illustration of some the challenges related to community policing initiatives. Even though the deployment of neighbourhood watch teams is at the core of the security strategy of the Municipality of The Hague, the specific local situation has a strong influence on the particular implementation of this practice. In the paper we will reflect on this difference between a theory of a practice and the actual practice of that theory.

Spoorwijk – a neighbourhood with a history of problems
Spoorwijk is a neighbourhood in the municipal district Laak in the South-West of the City of The Hague. The neighbourhood derives its name from its location between the tracks leading to two of the main railway stations in The Hague[2]. This part of Laak is built in the early 1900's and was at this time one of the first districts to have for the most part social housing. Since the 1970s, the neighbourhood has received negative attention due to the recurring 'summer riots' during which residents challenge the police seemingly without any reason. During the 1980, many buildings were vacant and the level of crime was high. The neighbourhood is also known for recurring problems with public order, in particular during times of the European or World Cup soccer.

During the 1990s, a regeneration program was started to improve the quality of housing, in order to attract new, more affluent inhabitants. Such urban regeneration strategy is known as gentrification (Palen & London, 1984). Many old houses were demolished and new houses were build. Whereas many of the old houses were social housing, the new houses were sold to private owners. The new houses attracted a lot of new inhabitants, with a large representation of immigrants. Most of the old inhabitants could not afford to buy the new houses and had to move away. To this day, there are a lot of tensions between the long-time inhabitants and the buyers of the newly developed houses. This type of unintended consequences of gentrification strategies are not uncommon. McDougall (1981) argues that *gentrification* often leads to conflict between old and new residents about the use of open space, resources and facilities in the community.

Currently Spoorwijk has 4.161 inhabitants according to the most recent statistics[3]. In Spoorwijk problems like poverty, unemployment and high crime rates are part of daily life. In the past few

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[2] "Spoor" in Dutch means track.
[3] http://www.denhaag.buurtmonitor.nl/

years the rate of domestic burglaries has risen. Most burglaries are committed by a specific criminal group who lives in the district. The group has a lot influence in the neighbourhood through violence and threats towards residents and professionals. As a consequence, the willingness among residents to report incidents to the police is very low.

Motivation behind the implementation of The Neighbourhood Watch teams
For the municipality and city district, the implementation of neighbourhood watch teams is a priority. The theory behind the implementation of different forms of community policing is that the residents get more involved with the situation in their living area, also leading to strengthened social ties between residents. As Garland (2001) explains, this is part of a responsibilization strategy whereby governments aim to create a feeling of shared responsibility among citizens towards specific tasks. Important for the implementation of neighbourhood watch teams is that they work together with and are supervised by professionals, such as the neighbourhood police officer and/or professional community workers. This leads to a network of informal control in the neighbourhood. From the perspective of security, the deployment of members of the community in policing tasks is relevant because the residents have a lot of (intangible) knowledge about the community (social norms and they know how to communicate with their fellow residents), they are trusted more by other residents than the police or local government and it directly influences the feelings of security among residents in the community. As such, the neighbourhood watch teams contribute to the regulation of behaviour of other residents, which helps the police to act faster and more effectively (Bennet et al., 2006). To achieve these benefits, it is important that the composition of the team is representative for the diversity in the community.

The Neighbourhood Watch in Spoorwijk
The current neighbourhood watch team in Spoorwijk has its roots in a project with street representatives that was initiated in 2003. Due to the problems in the neighbourhood , the municipality decided to look for street representatives who volunteer to pay extra attention in their own street. They have a direct contact point with the police and municipality to whom they can report irregularities. To prevent retaliation from the criminal groups, street representatives remain anonymous. This project eventually evolved into the implementation of a neighbourhood watch team that broadens the activities of the representatives, under supervision of the community worker and in cooperation with the neighbourhood police officer. The main driver for setting up the team was the increasing number of domestic burglaries in the neighbourhood.

The activities of the neighbourhood watch team in Spoorwijk mainly involve patrolling the neigbourhood. Generally they patrol once a week. The composition of the team is not entirely representative for the neighbourhood. Most of the members of the team are between the ages of 40 and 50. None of the members live in the most problematic part of the neighbourhood.

In most cases, neighbourhood watch teams will wear recognizable clothing showing that they are a patrol team. However, in Spoorwijk the team does not want to be easily recognized because they are afraid of retaliations by the criminal groups in the area. In addition, because of the long grown levels of distrust towards police and municipality, most residents in Spoorwijk do not want to be associated with the police or municipality. This results in an interesting situation, because the visibility of surveillance activities is seen as one of the core aspects of this type of intervention that

contributes to its effectiveness. The physical presence of a surveillance team would have a preventative effect (Bennet et. al, 2006). That effect is currently not fully exploited in Spoorwijk because the team wants to keep a low profile. There are however, signs in the neighbourhood stating the presence of neighbourhood watch teams, that makes the active presence of surveillants more widely known. Another important driver for implementation of community policing is the improved relation between citizens and police. In the case of Spoorwijk, this is also a bit problematic. The neighbourhood watch team does not want the neighbourhood police officer to join them on their patrols, again because they are reluctant to be associated with the police.

Reflection & Conclusion

Although there has been quite some research on the effectiveness of community policing, this example highlights that the specific implementation is influenced by the local context. Due to the existing problems and tensions in Spoorwijk, some of the main contributions of community policing to the security in the area are diminished. The dominance of the criminal group in the neighbourhood leads to fear among citizens to be openly cooperating with the police. Therefore the team works in a covert fashion, taking away the power of visibility of their patrols. Also, they do not want to openly cooperate with the neighbourhood police officer, which seems to sustain the culture of distrust towards the police (and municipality) in the area.

This does not mean that the team is not effective or relevant. It still contributes to improving the social ties within the community and the feeling of control among participants. This is another important objective of involving citizens in security interventions, according to the 'Best of Three Worlds' theory (Versteegh et al. 2010) that underpins the strategic security plans of The Hague. It does however mean that there is a difference between a theory and the results in practice. This is important to consider when developing plans for urban security enhancement.

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