Controlling anti-social behaviour in a mixed neighbourhood: intergroup conflict and neighbourhood policing

(extended abstract)

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This paper examines the control of anti-social behaviour in relation to neighbourhood policing in a mixed neighbourhood. Mixed urban areas – here understood as multi-functional areas with a mixed residential population (for class, ethnicity, age, lifestyle, etc.) and visiting public – are fascinating, for diversity brings with it potential tensions. The presence of different categories of people means different routines, different desires and needs, and different practices of involvement with the area. They may have different views on what ensures the 'quality of life' in this space and on how to define and solve problems. Furthermore, policy makers see diversity as an ideal form of urban life, for it alludes to inclusion, cohesion and tolerance. However, the presence of a mixed population does not automatically imply all this. Spatial integration may well go together with sharp social divisions and intergroup conflict. Such conflicts become manifest in concerns about anti-social behaviour (ASB) and crime and the ways in which ASB and crime are controlled. This gives insight into the relations between categories of residents and users in a mixed neighbourhood. In this paper I look at one way in which residents are involved in social control: through neighbourhood policing.

Neighbourhood policing can be seen as a combination of state and extra-state social control. The police organises a structure for members of the public to engage in social control. Carr (2005) calls this hybrid form of social control 'the new parochialism'. In a context of diminished private and traditional social control (e.g. supervision by parents and teachers), citizens act on crime and disorder in forms and structures that are facilitated by public (state) actors. Neighbourhood policing involves, for example, Neighbourhood Action Groups and various Partnerships, which bring together a range of actors – citizens, professionals, governmental actors and the police. Citizens are thus encouraged and invited to have an active role in controlling crime and disorder. This is potentially problematic as those who are most often 'controlled' – those with a marginal social position, such as homeless people and certain categories of youths and ethnic minority groups – are also less likely to engage in formal structures of power and politics. We might see that those who have most economic and political capital are more involved and thus set the agenda, potentially at the expense of less resource-rich people. In such a situation social control should rather be described as 'the tyranny of the middle class' (Patillo, 2009) or 'urban revanchism' (Smith, 1996).

This paper discusses first insights based on a qualitative study in a mixed neighbourhood in Oxford (UK). The neighbourhood policing strategy of the Thames Valley Police, of which Oxford is part, involves various ways in which citizens are engaged in social control. For example, the priorities of neighbourhood policing are set based on consultation of the public, which has place every 18 months. Currently, the three priorities in the research area are: 1) alcohol-related ASB, 2) parking/traffic, 3) drug dealing/drug misuse. Furthermore, Police Community Support Officers (PSCOs) are charged with 'engagement' with the community – and particularly the various groups within the community (e.g. ethnic communities, religious groups, youth). Engagement should make the police more aware of problems and policing needs (other goals are gathering intelligence and reassurance). Another way in which residents may be involved in social control is through the Neighbourhood Action Group (NAG). The NAG functions as a platform to discuss problems and solutions. Participants, besides the Neighbourhood Policing Team, are representatives of Brookes University, Brookes Student Union, traffic police, churches, charities and residents' associations. The study shows that the strategy of engagement and the NAG can serve to negotiate conflicts in a peaceful way. On the other hand, these strategies of neighbourhood policing run the risk of giving a small and select group of residents much power to influence policing and control anti-social behaviour.

References

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