



Building trust in modern day policing: A neighbourhood community officer evaluation

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ABSTRACT

Over the past several years the Toronto Police Service has engaged in forming partnerships with communities that have been plagued with high crime rates and have traditionally not trusted the police through the implementation of The Neighbourhood Community Officer Program. The program places Neighbourhood Community Officers in the community for three to five years with a strict mandate to build trust through professionalism, cooperation, and partnerships with community members. Prior research on the program displayed that it was achieving most of its mandate. To determine whether it was still enjoying success, a thematic analysis was conducted on interviews with social agencies that worked with Neighbourhood Community Officers and social agencies that did not.

INTRODUCTION*

Recent media releases have reported on an apparent distrust between the Toronto Police Service (TPS) and members of minority groups, which is hindering police legitimacy for the TPS (Gillis & Rankin, 2019). This seemingly growing disconnect has been accompanied by a wave of violent crime that has plagued the city and has left Torontonians asking whether the TPS really can help curb the violence (Gillis & Pagliaro, 2019). In order to overcome the issues that have been plaguing Toronto's communities, the TPS understood that it had to develop more proactive partnerships with community members and social agencies under the guise of community policing's (CP's) components (Drummond, 2018). This would allow all stakeholders to engage in problem-solving techniques to address crime and victimization within their neighbourhoods while working efficiently together and enhancing police legitimacy (Quinton & Tuffin, 2007).

The TPS introduced the Neighbourhood Community Officer Program (NCOP) in 2013 to specific neighbourhoods in Toronto where trust and partnership between the police and community have been lacking. The TPS assigned Neighbourhood Community Officers (NCOs) to specific neighbourhoods for a period of up to two years, their main

objectives being to increase trust between residents and themselves, reduce crime, gain insight into community needs, and work on improving intelligence about local crime in those communities (Webber et al., 2017). The NCOs were selected based on performance evaluations, knowledge of and involvement in community issues, and strong interpersonal and conflict resolution skills (Webber et al., 2017). Strained relations have meant that NCOs have had to remain patient and engage in innovative strategies to build trust between themselves and the community to enhance their mandate all while reports surfaced that put the TPS's legitimacy into question (Hayes, 2018).

Literature Review

Traditionally, not all members of society perceive their police services as having legitimacy, even when the philosophy and components of CP are used (Rukus et al., 2018). In order to gauge Torontonians' perceptions of the TPS's legitimacy, the Toronto Police Services Board (TPSB) conducted a quantitative study in 2019 to measure community members' perception of the TPS's legitimacy. Participants were asked about interactions they have had with the TPS and whether they believed those officers engaged in professional and/or biased conduct. Of the participants surveyed, an overwhelming percentage of visible minorities believed police officers had discriminated against them in the past through police interactions and that TPS officers could do more to engage with community members (Fearon & Farrell, 2019). Moreover, a survey conducted in 2017 found that African

* This study is only a small sample of the research that was obtained from the many communities in the City of Toronto. The data researched was highlighted using four social agency perspectives and the conclusions presented may not reveal the full extent of the study just by the evident analysis in this article.

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Canadian males living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the City of Toronto were disproportionately stopped in public by the TPS on pretext of carding, accounting for nearly 80% of these stops (Breen, 2017). This was at a time when the TPS was heavily using carding practices in low-income communities while treating individuals with a micro-aggressive attitude, including following them, treating them with rudeness and suspicion, and threatening them (Breen, 2017). Owusu-Bempah (2014) suggests that African Canadian males view the TPS as a discriminatory police service, and that interactions with police officers escalate into hostile encounters because individuals are stopped for no reason other than their skin tone.

Community responses have shown that NCOs are able to lower the fear of crime and contribute to residents' feelings of safety and security by helping increase community cohesion (Webber *et al.*, 2017). The positive results generated by the NCOP in at-risk communities predominantly made up of visible minorities are at odds with the TPSB's findings, which suggest that its officers could do more to engage with the same population. The TPSB survey may not represent an accurate picture of visible minorities' and residents of disadvantaged communities' perceptions of TPS officers. But the continuing poor relationship between visible minorities and the TPS reported in the media raises the question of whether NCOs can positively influence the relationship between themselves and the agencies they work with.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to evaluate whether the NCOP is still continuing to work under its main mandate to help increase police legitimacy for the TPS while building on the research that has already been conducted on the NCOP. Two social agencies that work closely with NCOs were chosen as the sample population to be interviewed. An additional two agencies that do not work with NCOs were interviewed as a control population. The sets of interviews were then compared using a thematic analysis to help determine codes and themes that would provide insight into whether the NCOP was still functioning positively. During the interviews, the old terms Neighbourhood Policing Program (NPP) and Neighbourhood Officer (NO) were used rather than the new terms such as Neighbourhood Community Policing Program (NCOP) and Neighbourhood Community Officer (NCO) as they were thought to be more familiar. The neighbourhoods where the agencies in this study are situated were selected based on numerous variables, such as the level of poverty among the community, neighbourhood crime rate patterns, and ethnographic makeups. This would substantiate the NCOP's success in helping lower crime rates in neighbourhoods traditionally been plagued by crime. The demographics were also used as an overlay to understand the makeup of visible minorities living in neighbourhoods where the NCOP has been implemented to determine whether previous research contradicts how visible minorities feel towards officers with whom they have frequent contact.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of community policing and its principles guided our research. The theory has its roots in the 1820s

in London, England, when Sir Robert Peel established England's first modern police service (Griffiths, 2016). Peel's mandate under CP was to create a perception that the community and police rely equally on each other (Webber *et al.*, 2017). Community policing is based on three essential components: community partnerships, problem-solving, and organizational transformation (Webber *et al.*, 2017). These have led to CP being defined as a philosophy, management style, and an organizational strategy that allows the police to deliver their services by engaging in partnerships with agencies and community members to help address the root causes of crime and social disorder (Gill *et al.*, 2014). This concept of CP helps bring the police closer to the public, helping them get to know their communities' concerns and be able to apply the proper resources to each problem. All stakeholders therefore become problem solvers, which should eventually lead to a decline in resistance towards the police (Fielding, 2005).

Although the definition of CP is reasonably understandable, its mantra has been critiqued by different police services and gone through numerous phases to be more in line with their attitudes and ethos. This makes the foundations of CP open to interpretation and difficult to measure (Griffiths, 2016). The difference between the police's and the community's perceptions of community issues is a frustrating barrier when trying to test for positive impacts towards the effect of CP initiatives (Stein & Griffith, 2017). Community policing has been implemented inconsistently across police jurisdictions, making it difficult to determine whether community partnerships and problem-solving are working effectively.

Fielding, a community theorist, believes that empirical findings have shown CP to be problematic in high-crime and high-deprivation areas. Fielding suggests that mistrust and strained relations between the police and members of those communities make it difficult for CP's tenets to thrive in those neighbourhoods (Stein & Griffith, 2017; Fielding, 2005). High-crime and high-deprivation neighbourhoods have traditionally been made up of visible minorities in western countries, leading to outsider perceptions that the members of the community themselves are problematic (Drummond, 2018; Adedoyin *et al.*, 2019). Community policing was not designed to create proactive partnerships between the police and one specific group, but rather to help all racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural groups that traditionally have or do not have a positive relationship with the police (Rukus *et al.*, 2018). It allows all individuals in the community to acquire a sense of power and helps build a perception of police legitimacy and trust in the police service (Rukus *et al.*, 2018).

Fielding's belief is problematic because CP should be able to contribute the most to high-crime and deprived areas but is being impeded by mistrust and strained relations. The implementation of new strategies requires the contribution of community members but community police officers need to take the lead on program implementation to achieve the success. In order to do so, they first need to gain the trust of members of the community (Stein & Griffith, 2017). We hypothesize that the interviews with participants from agencies that work closely with NCOs will touch on the components of CP that NCOs are using to help build trust

and cooperation between community members and social agencies, while those components of CP will be absent from the interviews with those who do not work with NCOs and may at times have had to deal with TPS patrol officers.

METHODOLOGY

The research method used was a set of four interviews with an embedded thematic analysis. The unit of analysis was the NCOP in Toronto, Ontario, and the research question was “To what extent have NCOs influenced the relationship between themselves and their communities through the agencies they work with?” In order to evaluate how well the NCOs were doing, members of two agencies (*Agency #1*: Homes First Kennedy Women’s Shelter, and *Agency #2*: Agincourt Community Services Association) that work closely with NCOs and two agencies (*Agency #3*: Westway Christian Church, and *Agency #4*: Montgomery Inn) that did not work with any NCOs were interviewed. Three propositions potentially surfaced from the interviews: 1) agencies that work with NCOs will have a more positive outlook of the NCOP and the TPS; 2) Agencies that do not work with NCOs will have less of a positive outlook of the NCOP and TPS; 3) NCOs help create more proactive partnerships built on trust between the TPS and the communities they work in.

Once all four interviews were coded, the framework analysis was used to undertake a thematic analysis of each transcript to determine relevant details, the type of language, and common themes used by the interviewees. Two of CP’s essential components (community partnerships and problem-solving) along with public views of the police (public satisfaction and police legitimacy) provided the theoretical framework for the thematic analysis, while the three propositions outlined above aided in the development and identification of major themes and sub-themes during primary coding. Primary themes were initiated through the agency correspondent’s responses as either positive or negative, allowing their responses to be specified under labeled categories, which then helped lead to the formation of the secondary codes. The secondary themes were formed not through positive or negative responses but the number of times specific words and titles were used. Once the secondary themes were established, positive and negative responses from initial coding were brought back into the theme-evoking process to determine the primary themes of the thematic analysis. The thematic framework presented two distinctive themes based on the positive and negative codes that emerged from seven different secondary themes. See Figures 1 and 2 below.

RESULTS

The results were assessed using subjective data analysis. The following are some of the abbreviated highlights of this study and, on their own, may not reveal the full extent of the study and analysis conducted.

Agencies that Work with NCOs

The data in Figure 2A supports the first and third propositions that guide this study. Consistent across both interviews was that NCOs helped establish partnerships between

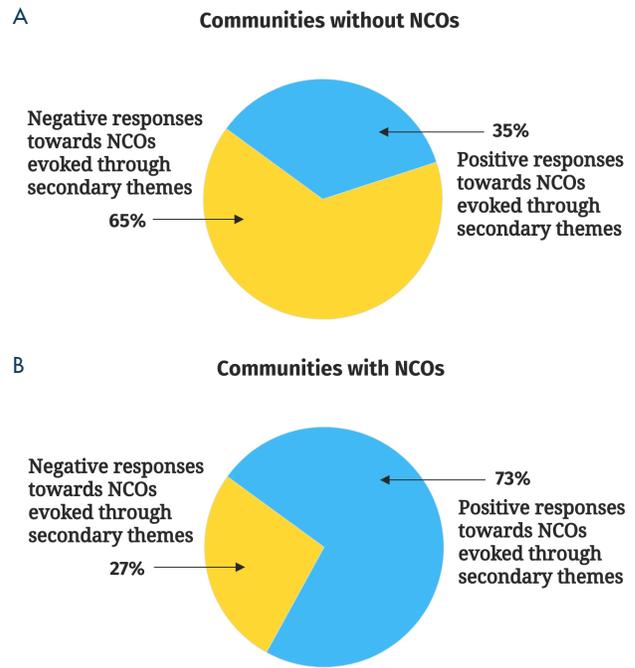


FIGURE 1 Primary themes evoked across secondary themes through positive and negative responses of the NCOP. A) Primary Theme 1: The NCOP establishes partnerships between communities and the TPS. B) Primary Theme 2: The absence of the NCOP has no effect in creating partnerships between communities and the TPS. NCO = Neighbourhood Community Officer; NCOP = Neighbourhood Community Officer Program; TPS = Toronto Police Service.

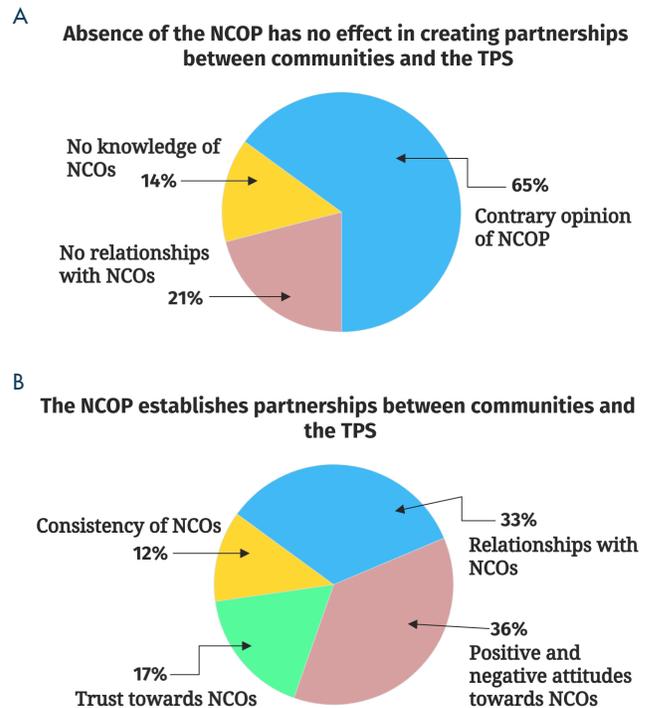


FIGURE 2 Secondary themes evoked through interview responses. NCOP = Neighbourhood Community Officer Program; TPS = Toronto Police Service; NCO = Neighbourhood Community Officer.

their communities and the TPS. Agency correspondents referred to how strongly NCOs were committed to forming relationships with different types of community members using different strategies for each group, allowing the NCOs to remain consistent while building partnerships in the community: “NCOs take initiative to make sure that relationships are built with other members and partners of the community” (Agency #1); “NCOs also remained in contact and involved” (Agency #1); “NCOs are consistent and involved with community support and other initiatives” (Agency #2).

Interviewees also made reference to the trust that has been established between the community and NCOs, which has helped form positive attitudes towards NCOs on the part of community members: “NCOs approach with a friendly motion to create comfort with a client” (Agency #1); “Community members trust NCOs with information as opposed to other officers” (Agency #2); “Trust is limited to only those involved with the agency, which includes NCOs” (Agency #1); “NCOs are viewed through a different lens because of their relationships with community members compared to regular police officers” (Agency #2). While a high percentage of responses were considered positive, 27% of excerpts were framed as negative responses. Most of these revealed suggestions regarding what the NCOP can do better, for example, “Training in trauma, mental health and dealing with LGBTQ2+ [is required] for NCOs” (Agency #1); “NCOs do not work at night and most crimes occur late in the night” (Agency #2); “Visibility of recognizing an NCO is an issue” (Agency #1).

Agencies that Do Not Work with NCOs

The datasets from agencies that do not work with NCOs were inconsistent in terms of secondary themes and the number of responses being framed as negative or positive. The figures surrounding the makeup of primary and secondary themes regarding agencies that do not work with NCOs supports the second proposition guiding this study to a certain extent. Consistent across both interviews was that there were contrary opinions about whether the NCOP could help each agency’s community if it were to be implemented. Both interviews referred to the issues that might arise and gains that would result if the NCOP were to be implemented in their community. This led to contrary opinions regarding the NCOP and NCOs: “The NCOP could have a negative outlook on the community by hinting that there may be a problem in the community when in fact there is not” (Agency #4); “I believe that having NCOs can cause more damage than good but probably won’t make a difference in the end” (Agency #3); “Seniors that come to the agency place a majority of trust in police” (Agency #4); “No need for a program like the NCOP in the community due to low levels of crime” (Agency #4).

Furthermore, each agency mentioned having no prior knowledge of the NCOP preceding the interview: “I had no idea there was one” (Agency #3); “I was not aware that there was a particular and specific neighbourhood officer program” (Agency #4). The lack of knowledge regarding the NCOP led to there being no relationship with NCOs. About a third (35%) of excerpts were framed as positive even though these agencies have had no contact with NCOs. Like those

of agencies that work with NCOs, most of these excerpts included suggestions regarding what the NCOP could do if it were to be implemented in their communities: “Would help certain groups in the area who are fearful of crime rates going up, and having NCOs around would help lower some community perceptions of being victimized” (Agency #4); “NCOs would help teach children that the police are on their side” (Agency #3). These quotes indicated that both agency correspondents did believe that there is always a benefit that their community can derive from the NCOP.

DISCUSSION

The responses from participants in this study help increase the TPS’s legitimacy in areas where the NCOP is being implemented and show that the NCOP has the ability to frame NCOs as more than just authority figures. These officers appear to be making some notable strides with agencies in regard to building relationships, which then make problem-solving easier with community members’ support. This study showcases that the TPS has acknowledged and accepted that there are issues between themselves and specific communities that need to be addressed and properly solved without resorting to the band-aid approach whereby the police look at the problem from the outside without addressing the underlying causes of the issue (Addeo, 2019).

The results drawn from this study’s thematic analysis supported propositions one and three, and slightly supported proposition two. In support of propositions one and three, it was reported that in communities where the NCOP is implemented, NCOs were patient and used their strong interpersonal and conflict resolution skills to help agencies and members of the community begin to trust them. According to the agencies that work with NCOs, this tactic was very successful because it gave community members a chance to slowly build their trust in the NCOs. Agencies that work with NCOs believed that when NCOs remained patient and worked on gaining community trust, it allowed the NCOs to gain knowledge of community issues and increase their involvement. When NCOs used their time wisely by getting to know the issues before establishing trust, they were able to attend to calls with prior knowledge of the issues they could face at each call. This approach created partnerships built on trust between community members, social agencies, and NCOs, which, in turn, led to agencies and community members having a more positive opinion of the NCOP and the TPS. This was possible because agencies and community members began to perceive the NCOP as a strategy designed to help build trust, create partnerships, and problem solve in areas that have for so long been lacking. The professionalism and highly skilled qualities that NCOs brought to the community may have contributed to the perceptions of community members that not all TPS officers and personnel should be painted with the same brush when negative encounters surface.

Proposition two of this study was only slightly supported due to the fact that the correspondents for agencies that did not work with NCOs had not heard of the NCOP. Each correspondent believed that implementing the NCOP into their neighbourhoods would be problematic due to the low levels of crime in their specific areas. The presence

of an NCO would either leave their clients with a perception that there is a problem in the community or just be a waste of resources. However, it was also found that each agency believed that there was a group that would benefit from the presence of an NCO, such as children or seniors.

CONCLUSION

The empirical research conducted in this study suggests that the NCOP should be used where it is needed the most and that resources for the NCOP should not be allocated to neighbourhoods that may not benefit from it, demonstrating the necessity of allocating police resources responsibly.

The TPS is helping empower communities to take back control of their neighbourhoods by supporting the NCOP's mandate. Moreover, it may also be helping visible minorities in those communities gain a better understanding of the TPS's mission, vision, and core values, thereby slowly gaining their trust. Toronto Police Service managers have been able to strategically implement the NCOP in neighbourhoods where it is needed the most, in communities that have been plagued by high crime rates and have traditionally had a bitter relationship with the TPS. In an era where credibility is lacking, the NCOP may well be humanizing the badge, which will not only help make the TPS more professional and trustworthy, but will also help the police gain greater legitimacy in the eyes of all Torontonians.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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