Aussie experience: local government community safety officers and capacity building*

Adrian Cherney
Regulatory Institutions Network, Security 21, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University

Adam Sutton
Department of Criminology, University of Melbourne

KEY WORDS
community safety officers
Australia
roles
skills
capacity-building

ABSTRACT

The authors discuss trends in crime prevention and community safety particular to Australia. They report on research examining the role local government community safety officers (CSOs) play in the formation and implementation of crime prevention strategies in their home state of Victoria. The paper is based upon interview data conducted with CSOs and will assess key challenges and problems encountered in the management and implementation of strategies at the local level. Issues assessed include the role of community safety practitioners as ‘change managers’. Broader lessons relating to training, capacity building and strengthening the role of local government are drawn from the research that are of relevance to community safety policy in the UK and abroad.

THE LESSONS OF COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

A recent edition of Community Safety Journal (volume 3, issue 1 January 2004) focused on analysing crime prevention and community safety outside the UK, looking at the experiences of European countries across the English Channel. The editor of this edition stated the aim was to highlight similarities and differences between the UK and the rest of Europe, generating an international set of debates around community safety and crime prevention (Hughes, 2004: 2).

Both authors have watched European developments with much interest, policies in the UK and other parts of Europe influencing developments in their own country of Australia (see Cherney, 2003; Sutton, 1997; Sutton & Cherney, 2002). In the same spirit as the issue edited by Hughes, we wish to discuss trends in crime prevention and community safety particular to Australia, but that resonate with experience in the UK and abroad. While one of the key characteristics of community safety practice is its diversity, Edwards and Hughes (2002) rightly point out that unlocking this multiplicity is essential to making more grounded conclusions about processes of policy development and implementation. Exploring experiences worldwide in crime prevention are an important agenda for doing just this.

THE COMMUNITY SAFETY OFFICER ROLE

The topic both authors wish to analyse is the role of the community safety officer (CSO) within local government, a position that has become pivotal to


Community Safety Journal • Volume 3 Issue 3 • July 2004 © Pavilion

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
the development and implementation of local community safety strategies in Australia, particularly in their home state of Victoria (Cherney, 2004). This is a ripe topic for comparative analysis with recent decades seeing the emergence of the CSO as a distinct occupational grouping across Europe (de Maillard, 2004; Bailey, 2003; Hughes, 2002; Gilling & Hughes, 2002; Hughes & Edwards, 2001).

The emergence of the CSO role has in part been generated by the increasing role local authorities have been allocated in the delivery of crime prevention and community safety programs, central strategies and funding streams providing avenues for employment in CSO positions. Likewise efforts by central governments and private sector bodies to advise on what constitutes community safety ‘expertise’ and develop training and competencies in crime prevention and community safety work has also seen the CSO role receive increasing attention.

The latter development has been particularly important, with the emphasis upon training and competencies rationalised under the guise of local capacity building. This agenda in particular has focused around the identification of ‘what works’, disseminating such knowledge and applying these best-practice lessons locally. However, an increasing number of people have begun to voice concern about such a program of capacity building, questioning whether local practitioners are really best-served by trends to develop specific competencies and identify ‘what works’ in a narrow technical sense (see Cherney, 2002; 2004; Gilling & Hughes, 2002; Hughes & Edwards, 2001).

A key issue relevant to capacity building is exploring what the CSO role is actually about and what obstacles such practitioners face. Many have begun to investigate such experience (eg. Bailey, 2003; Hughes & Gilling, forthcoming). This question is especially important to any capacity building agenda (ie, strengthening the CSO’s role and the development of training packages) because it goes to the issue of relevance and how central government can best assist local action.

To explore these issues and draw out lessons for local practice, both authors will discuss research they have conducted into the CSO role in Australia. This includes research undertaken by one of the authors for a doctoral thesis (Cherney, 2003) and work that formed part of an Australian Research Council grant (ARC Linkage grant LP0211993) between Melbourne University’s Department of Criminology and the Victorian Department of Justice Policy Unit Crime Prevention Victoria. Both projects have involved directly talking with CSOs within local government (totalling over 50 conversations with CSOs in Victoria and interstate in Queensland and New South Wales) as well as administering a questionnaire similar to a survey conducted by Gilling and Hughes (2002).

**WHAT IS THE COMMUNITY SAFETY OFFICER ROLE ABOUT?**

From these conversations and survey results three key themes constantly come to the fore as encompassing the CSO role:

1. **CSOs as change managers: entails facilitation, mobilisation, networking and embedding tasks.**

   CSOs we spoke to detailed how their role entailed transforming the ways agencies operated and worked together to achieve both inter-agency cooperation and the mainstreaming of crime prevention and community safety. On one level CSOs, through the development and implementation of local community safety plans and by using funds from various sources, strived to ensure that a wide range of local practices (eg, urban planning, design and maintenance, family support, education and recreational programs etc) were better informed by crime prevention theory. The authors have termed this as an embedding task (Cherney, 2003; Sutton & Cherney,
2002; forthcoming). In summing her role up, one CSO eloquently stated:

‘A lot rests with the community safety officer to manage and change what people are doing and this is not like the old traditional project officer’s role, which is working on a few community projects. It requires a change management role of coordinating a whole lot of agencies.’

2. CSOs as flexible problem solvers.
Flexibility and the ability to manage diverse tasks was a core skill that CSOs regarded as particularly important. Being ‘flexible’ was vital in the identification of viable solutions, given that the focus of strategies could shift week to week (eg due to media coverage of high profile issues like illicit drug use) with their implementation always conditional on the commitment of key agencies and groups, which could also fluctuate periodically. The importance of flexible problem-solving has also been highlighted by work undertaken by Tim Hope in the UK (Hope, 2003).

The experiences of CSOs highlighted that rather than being ‘straight-jacketed’ by ‘what works’ lessons, methods of evaluation and crime data, such tools should be conceived as providing CSOs with a ‘grab bag’ or ‘kit’ to carry out flexible problem solving. They should not be imposed under some rigid formula and actually doing so ignores basic conditions that determine the extent to which certain fundamental tasks can be carried out. For example in response to questioning about training in evaluation and why she did not assess the outcomes of local initiatives, one CSO commented:

‘I don’t need another course in evaluation. We keep getting told to do evaluation, that not enough is done...but I can’t evaluate because I don’t have the time to do it. How can I evaluate when pressure is for me to move onto the next task, the next project. It takes resources and time to do evaluation, which I don’t have. So don’t tell me that I need more training in this area.’

3. Community safety officers as transformative agents: shifting people’s mindsets away from ‘law and order’ to more inclusive responses to crime and safety.
Hughes (2002) on the future role of the CSO position in the UK speculated whether CSOs might possibility become ‘transformative agents’ who promote an alternative inclusive discourse around community safety. Like their UK counterparts CSOs in Australia favour the term community safety over crime prevention given its broader focus, seeing the latter as too narrow a conception of their role. Many local government areas in the State of Victoria have pursued broad community safety agendas as a direct result of the efforts of highly dedicated CSOs. What did come out during our interviews with CSOs was that they spoke a lot about ‘having to shift people’s mind sets away from law and order’, acting as a catalyst for ‘people to think about the issues differently’. It would appear that CSOs as transformative agents is a real possibility.

Overall our research indicated that CSOs were highly skilled people, with diverse backgrounds and experiences. They relished the challenges of their role and the flexibility it provided. Significantly what their experiences illustrated was that (using Ekblom’s 2002 typology) two core skills and knowledge bases dominate the CSO role:

- ‘Know-how’ knowledge – ie, skills and competencies about organisational practices, and ways of negotiating the restructuring of these processes and facilitating the ownership of initiatives,
- ‘Know-who’ knowledge – ie, awareness of support networks and personnel within and external to central and local authorities, who commands authority, possesses relevant
expertise and can assist in the solving of problems.

In many ways it was these types of core knowledge bases that were essential to the CSO role rather than those based around narrow technical competencies about the most effective methods of crime prevention. One CSO best summed this reality up in the following way:

‘Identifying others with the skills for crime prevention and community safety is more important, not the actual possession of those skills... see an important part of my role is one of advocacy, bringing people together to look at problems and alternative ways of solving them.’

While theory and knowledge about best practise was important to allow CSOs to pursue change management objectives, broader skills (negotiation etc) were more important in ensuring practices were imbedded. This was not something that training or competencies could necessarily capture as one CSO commented on:

‘Some of the skills and knowledge required for crime prevention is a whole other level that is not captured by standards or by training... I’m talking about processes of change management’.

WHAT KEY CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES DO CSOS FACE?

So how difficult is the CSO role? It is a complex task with CSOs often required to carry out multiple and at times contradictory tasks (eg, they are told to focus on ‘outcomes’ but are pressured by their employers and central government agencies to get as many projects as possible ‘up and running’ which forces them to fixate on outputs). The key challenges and obstacles voiced by CSOs are summarised below:

- Attracting and maintaining involvement of people and agencies in strategy development and implementation that really are not interested in crime prevention or community safety or want their activities labelled as such.
- Lack of commitment to partnership work and local strategy delivery from central government and local agencies.
- Maintaining the momentum and focus of partnerships.
- Lack of status and authority within the overall structure of local government to facilitate change in policies and practices.
- Agencies and units both within local authorities and externally who are unwilling to be held accountable for community safety outcomes.
- Unrealistic expectations on the part of local government employers that CSOs will deliver major program objectives.
- Balancing the need to be strategic (ie, focusing on long-term outcomes and ensuring strategies are sustainable) and pressure to produce ‘runs on the board’ by local authorities and central agencies.
- Greater value placed on ‘projects’ compared to ‘planning’ within local authorities.
- Tenuous and short-term employment conditions of CSOs, which impacts on their ability to establish sustainable working relationships with key agencies and individuals.
- Confusion over respective roles and responsibilities of central and local agencies and how each is to contribute to strategy outcomes.
- Central governments more interested in ‘law and order’, which undermines local efforts to promote more inclusive responses to crime and safety.
- Little time and resources to conduct evaluation.
- Short-term funding provisions.
- Few opportunities for local experience to impact on government policy due to lack of access to central policy making processes.
CONCLUSION: IMPROVING THE CAPACITY OF CSOS

So what does the experience reported above tell us about improving the capacity of the community safety officer role? Firstly, any capacity building agenda has to look at the administrative and political environments in which CSOs work and how that impacts on their abilities to carry out key tasks. This has actually little to do with training and competencies but with the devolution of resources, authority and decision-making powers to CSOs so they can actually initiate change management, which is a fundamental part of their role. In actual fact, the CSO experience reported here highlights that the key to successful crime prevention is forging organisational and political environments in which best practice can emerge (Cherney, 2003; 2004).

It is these contexts that will determine if best practice can be followed in practice. In many ways the essential skills relevant to the CSO role are learnt on the job through reiterative, reflex practices that enable CSOs to carry out flexible problem solving and find ways of embedding key principles and practices in the policies of relevant agencies. However, they cannot be expected to do this alone and capacity building must be focused on creating the ‘enabling conditions’ necessary for CSOs to embed community safety practices.

Address for correspondence
Dr Adrian Cherney
Regulatory Institutions Network
Research School of Social Sciences
1st Floor, Garden Wing, University House
Australian National University
Canberra ACT 0220
Australia
Tel: +61 2 6125 1511
Fax: +61 2 6125 1507
Email: Adrian.Cherney@anu.edu.au

References