

Sector Policing in South Africa: Case Closed.....or Not?

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Abstract

Police agencies from many democratic countries struggle to introduce effective crime reducing strategies. They also make a great effort to build sound community relationships. This is also relevant in South Africa (SA) as the South African Police Service (SAPS) has undergone a paradigm shift since the abolishment of the Apartheid regime in 1994. Before 1994, the South African Police (SAP) employed a militaristic approach to policing which was based on limited community involvement in law enforcement matters. Since then, the “force” has changed into a “service” with the emphasis on merged police-community partnerships. The introduction of community policing (CP) in 1994 when SA became a democracy has up until now not made dramatic impact on the country's widely documented crime problem. In fact, many practitioners and academics are questioning the effect and value of this police philosophy. Recently “Sector Policing” (SP) was introduced as a “new” and additional policing strategy to strengthen the relationship between the community and the police. A fresh emphasis was placed on this initiative that is aimed at preserving social order by encouraging police involvement in smaller, more manageable geographic sectors contained in a particular police station's area of responsibility. However, the SAPS is still finding it arduous to get information from the community and to develop a relationship of trust with them as the majority of the community members still deem the SAPS as either corrupt, unprofessional or the pawns of the government.

A comprehensive examination of the effectiveness of Sector Policing as a strategy to enhance police-community partnerships in a specific policing precinct will be delineated. Can this method of policing realistically be used to enhance community relationships and to increase policing output and success? Over a period of two years (2008 & 2009), eight community and research projects were undertaken in a specific policing area to determine whether the strategy is working as an innovative policing initiative. In addition, the strengths and weaknesses of SP will be highlighted with recommendations identified. The value of SP will be highlighted against the backdrop of the fact that South Africa hosted the FIFA Soccer World Cup in 2010 and many reports questioned the safety of visitors to the country during the entire time frame of this event. This paper also will shed some light on the standing of policing in South Africa in general and on the objective of SP, namely whether small groups of law enforcement officials who are responsible for SP in a specific sector can take responsibility for meeting as many of the policing needs of a particular area as possible.

Keywords

Community Policing, Sector Policing, Soccer World Cup, South Africa

Introduction

The crime rate is unacceptably high in South Africa (SA). SA is in particular renowned for its high murder rate and for other violent crimes such as home

invasions, vehicle hijacking and robbery. Well organized crime syndicates as well as individual criminals are also increasingly using sophisticated techniques to foil crime prevention initiatives in SA. New crimes also put a hem on new crime prevention projects and technological advancements in the prevention sphere. Some offenders become hardened repetitive offenders at a young age as they earn large amounts of money from vehicle hijackings or cash in transit heists before they are apprehended. These crimes are regarded as an easy and quick way to get rich. For example a new crime in SA such as the use of explosives to break into automatic teller machines (ATMs) is increasing at an alarming rate and these offenders usually get away with substantial undisclosed amounts of cash. ATM bombings have increased with 3000% in South Africa in 2008-2009 (www.News24.com). A significant number of these hardened and cunning criminals are never apprehended.

Crime has also become a threat to SA's national security and communities and business enterprises are increasingly falling prey to unscrupulous thugs and hoodlums who lack any sense of pity or morality. Hence a huge market has been created for the private security industry. Although a lot of money is spent on the latest security gadgets and on the peace of mind that armed response units can bring if you can afford it, South Africans are not coping with crime. The question that arises from this is: What is the South African Police Service (SAPS) doing to assist society in the curbing of the massive crime problem?

The South African Police Service (SAPS) has undergone a paradigm shift since the abolishment of the Apartheid regime in 1994. Before 1994, the South African Police Force (SAP) utilized a militaristic approach to policing which was based on limited community involvement in policing matters. Since then, the “force” has changed into a “service” with the emphasis on merged police-community partnerships. Like most bureaucratic countries, community policing (CP) has been introduced in South Africa (SA) since 1994 when this country became a democracy. The idea was that this new policing philosophy would bring about change of attitudes and a development of sound relationships between the community and the police (Roelofse, 2007:77). Community policing is a partnership between the police and the community to solve safety problems in a relevant policing district. After the introduction of CP as a policing strategy, it was envisaged that more effective crime control, improved police service and police legitimacy would be forthcoming. It is based on a proactive partnership between the police and the community that seeks to address crime and other social ills. It allows the police and the community to work closely together to solve problems and to reduce the fear of crime, physical and social disorder, and neighbourhood decay (Bezuidenhout, 2008:48). However, like in many countries, CP has up until now not made inroads on the crime problem in SA. In fact many practitioners and academics are questioning the impact and value

of this law enforcement philosophy. Thus criminal activities remain rife in SA despite the fact that this new open, participative and accountable approach is still being advocated and supported by many police advocates (Bezuidenhout, 2011:284).

In addition, recently an “add on” philosophy namely Sector Policing (SP) was introduced as a “new” additional policing strategy to strengthen the relationship between the community and the police in the fight against crime. A fresh emphasis was placed on this service approach that is aimed at preserving social order by encouraging police involvement in smaller, more manageable geographic sectors contained in a particular police precinct (www.saps.gov.za). Sector policing is a policing model that can be traced back to the previous decade, initially known as neighborhood policing in the United Kingdom. Maroga (2004:1) states that SP adopts a more decentralized approach to policing with the aim to address the root causes of crime in specific areas or communities. The intention is to develop partnerships with communities from all the different classes in South Africa. This approach could be very valuable since there are significant gaps and needs in poor and undeveloped areas in South Africa. Policing in South Africa is challenged on many levels since the majority of South Africans live in poor and crime ridden areas. The average citizen cannot afford the luxury of private security and SP is a modified policing approach that could address this void in crime control at the local level.

Although this new “flexible” community based way of policing was judged to bring the police and communities together, the SAPS is still finding it arduous to get information from the community and to develop a relationship of trust with them as the majority of the community still deem the SAPS as either corrupt, unprofessional or the pawns of the government. Also, failure of multi-dimensional approaches is evident and is being exacerbated by historic inequalities, poverty, substance abuse, dysfunctional families, unemployment, the abundant availability of illegal firearms and greed. In addition, a so-called “culture of violence” exists in South Africa which makes innovative policing efforts, strategies and philosophies (which are largely borrowed from other countries) redundant in some way.

The “subculture of violence” theory holds that the overt use of violence is generally a reflection of basic values that stand apart from the dominant culture. This overt (and often illicit) use of violence constitutes part of a subcultural normative system that is reflected in the psychological traits of the members of the subculture (Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1967:158). The term “subculture of violence” can be used to describe and explain the heightened incidence of violence and intolerance in South Africa (Vogelman & Lewis, 1993:41). Thus to understand any form of violent behaviour in the South African context and the policing thereof, the “subculture of violence” principle is important. It can therefore be assumed that resolving conflict through violence is part of the historical culture and context of South Africa.

Victims of crime often become perpetrators of retributive violence or show violence in other arenas such as the domestic front due to displaced aggression and frustration (Nedcor ISS Criminal Justice Information Centre, 1997). Research has shown that societies, like South Africa, in which violence and sexual assault are omnipresent, are characterised by male authoritarian conduct, a general patriarchal attitude towards domestic relations and power, as well as male dominance in general. Such societies are also characterised by the belief that violence is a legitimate form of problem solving (Burton, 2008:15; Beckner, 2005:21; Schreiner, 2004:44). This attitude which is very prominent in the South African milieu is one of the ingredients that make community policing and sector policing difficult to implement. Furthermore, many South Africans are guided by a materialistic carefree society that craves gluttony but detests the very poor and marginalised (Bezuidenhout, 2007:i). A significant number of South Africans live under the poverty line. Beggars and street children are usually treated as the outcasts of society. The typical aspects that determine a person's success in SA are: "What you drive" – your type of vehicle; "What you earn" – your income and "Where you live" – your home. Basic community values and healthy neighbourhood values have been replaced by these materialistic yardsticks and an absence of a sense of community. Hyper-emphasis on personal security measures and the actuarial private prevention partnership seems to be more successful than the community and sector policing objectives. The essence of community and sector policing is unfortunately not accommodated in this obsessive interest in monetary gain and self fortification. The private security industry is significantly larger than the South African Police Service (SAPS) – the public police. Private security is a multi million Rand (R), Dollar (\$) or Euro (€) industry in SA because of the violent crime menace that continues to be experienced.

The criminal justice system in South Africa as a whole and more specifically the public police service is seen as ineffective and inefficient as well as corrupt. Thus corruption, minimal skills and an unprofessional image are also hampering the authentic intent of community policing and more specifically sector policing in SA. In short, the community does not trust the police and the public negativism towards the SAPS and the non-embracement of CP and SP by the population are indirectly contributing to the high crime rate in SA. If the community trusts the police, go into partnership with the police, and divulge all the information they have on criminal activities in their neighbourhoods, the police will be able to react proactively and prevent crimes before they are committed. Keeping this in mind, the "newest" addition to the policing arsenal of the SAPS armoury against crime can be placed under the magnifying glass in order to determine whether it will have a chance to develop into a fully functional and successful crime reduction initiative.

Sector Policing in South Africa

Sector Policing implies a cooperative and symbiotic relationship between law enforcement and the community (Champion & Rush, 1997:3). The SAPS defines SP in the following way:

“Sector Policing means policing that focuses on small manageable sectors of a police station area. Sector Policing is a tool to implement Community Policing.” (www.saps.gov.za).

It is evident from the definition of SP that the implementation of Sector Policing at a police station requires more than one party. Although the idea of SP in SA is a decade old, it only recently became an official instruction to implement SP at police stations.

Approximately ten years ago (\pm 2000) SP was considered as a new policing approach in SA. SP brought new hope to address the crime problem in South Africa. Already in 2004 before proper implementation thereof the following was said about SP:

“As such sector policing is not only a practical manifestation of community policing but also a step towards the development of a modern, democratic policing style for the present century and thus to address the safety and security need of every inhabitant of South Africa.” (SAPS Training Division, 2004:4)

Only after many deliberations between senior managers in the police was SP officially accepted and was made a national instruction promulgated in this regard. As a result, SP should now have been officially implemented at all the 1116 police stations in SA. Thus after 10 years on 13 July 2009 it became an official instruction that SP is now an directed and official new instrument of policing in SA. The sanctioning of SP proposed that 45 stations in the 9 provinces in SA (5 stations per province) had to implement SP before the end of October 2009. It had been envisioned that all the stations had to implement it before the end of 2012 (Smit, 2010).

In spite of this delayed implementation process that lasted over a decade, many police stations implemented SP in their policing precincts before it became a national instruction. They used the guidelines that were communicated in a draft implementation plan. In this implementation plan, it was stipulated that the purpose of SP is that the sector commander in each of the sectors of the precinct had to:

- “Perform targeted visible police patrols
- Ensure a rapid response to complaints
- Address crime generators

- Investigate reported cases
- Provide a localized policing service to the community in accordance with their respective needs.” (www.saps.gov.za)

In view of the early acceptance by certain police stations in implementing SP before it became a national instruction, it has become feasible to investigate the success of SP in a specific policing precinct where sector policing has been already “implemented” since 2006, with the goal of finding out whether this new strategy of policing would have a different impact on police-community relationships and whether “buy-in” from the community members could be acquired successfully.

Methodology

As a strategy, SP is intended as an additional effort to enhance police-community partnerships in a specific policing region. The research question that guided this study was: Can sector policing be used to enhance community relationships and to increase policing output and success? In other words, could SP eventually be seen as the solution to the crime problem in SA?

Over a period of two years (2008 & 2009) eight community based projects were carried out in a policing precinct that served citizens from the middle to upper class. These research projects were undertaken with the help of my post graduate honours criminology students in this precinct to determine whether the SP strategy is working as a new innovative policing initiative on grass roots level. We also aimed at finding out what the community and business owners thought of the “new” policing initiative and whether it is working as a policing strategy.

This research project involved qualitative research methods in the different sectors of the selected policing regions. A standardised semi-structured interview schedule was used and qualitative data was gathered from participants. The interview questions were aimed at determining whether the research participants knew what SP entailed and whether they were involved in CP or SP. Furthermore, general questions were posed like which crimes the participants had recently seen, witnessed or reported, whether they thought the police had responded quickly and professionally and what security measures were being used by the participants. More focused questions were also posed with regard to sector policing and the sector commander. Police officials were also interviewed with regard to their perceptions about SP. The different sector commanders were also requested to express their opinions about sector policing. Also, the participants were reassured that their participation was voluntary, that all information would be kept confidential, and that sensitive questions did not have to be answered if they would cause any discomfort.