

The following are notes from a lecture delivered by Dr Trevor Bradley (lecturer in the School of Social and Cultural Studies) at the second annual Robson Collection lecture series on 30/11/2011

Crime in the neighbourhood: measuring public perceptions of crime and disorder. A Summary

Introduction

Since the late 1990s crime has enjoyed a consistently high political and media profile. With few exceptions parties from across the political spectrum have latched onto 'law and order' in recognition of its potential as a valuable vote-winner. Political competition to be seen as the toughest on crime has, in turn, given rise to a criminal justice approach, or mentality, commonly referred to as popular punitiveness. In attempting to justify this approach, and the enormous cost, politicians have claimed that they are simply responding to a fearful and anxious public and their demands for tough on crime policies. It was, then, a surprise to discover that little effort had been made to actually document public perceptions of crime or their demands for criminal justice reform. Despite the global economic crisis, and the subsequent cuts to public spending, new resources have literally poured into the police and prison services. It was this combination of punitive politics, the apparent public demand for it and the dearth of previous studies that provided the rationale and motivation for the research.

The Research

The research project consisted of two main components. The first was a survey of residents in four case-study communities in the North Island: Murrays Bay (North Shore), Otahuhu (South Auckland), Westown (New Plymouth) and

Havelock North (Hawkes Bay). The second, and the source of our qualitative data, was a series of follow-up focus group discussion in each of the four areas.

The case study communities were selected using three main criteria: socio-economic profile (median income), demographic profile (age, gender & ethnicity), and police recorded crime rate. The aim was to get a mix of high and low crime areas, high and low socio-economic profile and at least one area with a diverse ethnic composition (Otahuhu) to contrast with the predominantly European make up of the other communities.

In total 5000 survey questionnaires were distributed to households in Havelock North (1000), Murrays Bay (1000), Westown (1000) and Otahuhu (2000). Almost 1500 completed surveys were returned for a response rate of around 30%. Following an initial analysis of the survey data two follow-up focus group discussions were held in each study area and involved a total 61 self-selected volunteers.

Respondents were asked about perceived trends in crime, relative to other social and economic issues, to compare their local crime trends to other communities, to rate the seriousness of crime in their local neighbourhood and whether local crime problems were escalating. There followed a similar series of questions about the severity and trends in crime on a national scale. Respondents were asked to rate local and national crime problems relative to other neighbourhoods, and other social and economic concerns, so that local crime issues would be considered in context rather than in isolation.

The Survey Findings

Overall, in stark contrast to what we often hear from politicians and read in the newspapers, it quickly became apparent that communities are well informed

about local crime issues and have a sophisticated understanding of them: One that was often at odds with the prevailing political rhetoric and media portrayals of crime. Contrary to the ways in which ‘the community’ and its attitudes toward crime are typically represented it was both surprising and refreshing to discover that the majority of participants understood crime in proportion to its actual significance and in context.

Set against political and media claims that citizens are particularly fearful, anxious or angry about crime we found that a substantial proportion did not think crime was a serious problem in their own communities. In Havelock North, for example, a clear majority (69.4%) of respondents ‘disagreed’ that crime was a serious problem compared with other areas and issues. Across all four areas 63% of respondents disagreed that crime was a serious local problem.

In the two areas with high levels of recorded offences (Otahuhu and Westown) respondents were understandably more likely to ‘agree’ that crime was a serious problem. But even accounting for their higher rate of recorded crime almost a quarter of Otahuhu respondents, and more than 60% of Westown respondents, still ‘disagreed’ that crime was a serious local problem.

Immediately, then, we have to question the popular conception that the public are universally fearful and anxious about crime. When compared with the range of other problems faced by communities most thought that crime was not worthy of the disproportionate level of attention it receives in politics and the media.

A very different picture emerged when respondents were asked about crime in New Zealand as whole and the majority of respondents (80%) agreed that crime is a serious issue. Local crime problems were regarded as less serious and less

extensive than national trends. Even in the high-crime areas crime was regarded as a more serious problem nationally than it was locally.

The political and media messages the public often receive is that crime is a continually rising problem even though aggregate crime rates have consistently trended downwards since the mid-90s. This research found that across all four study areas less than a quarter of respondents (24.2%) agreed that crime was rising in their neighbourhood. Again, even in the high crime areas only a minority agreed that crime was an increasing problem in their locality compared with other areas.

It's clear, then, that respondents had quite different perspectives of crime in their own localities compared with nation-wide. The explanation for this discrepancy lay in the different conceptual frameworks employed by respondents and that they drew on different sources of information when evaluating local and national problems. Perceptions of neighbourhood crime were based on interactions with friends, neighbours, engagement with the community and on detailed knowledge of local geography. National crime problems were almost exclusively informed by news media coverage.

It's interesting too that gender appeared to make little difference to perceptions of local or national trends and both men and women had very similar perceptions of both local and national crime. In terms of age, the youngest age cohort (16–24 years) were the most likely to disagree that crime was increasing in the neighbourhood (77.8%). The group most likely to agree that crime was increasing in the neighbourhood were those aged 25–34 years (24%). This is notable because it contradicts the claim that older people are most likely to see crime as an increasing problem. Generally speaking, then, all age groups and both men and women shared similar perceptions and all cohorts were

considerably more likely to agree that crime was a more serious and escalating problem across the country as a whole than it was locally.

The Focus Groups

In the follow up discussions local crime problems were typically discussed in ways that were highly nuanced, complex and conditional. This is, in itself, something of a corrective to much of the prevailing political rhetoric which presents law and order in stark and very certain terms. The focus groups revealed a basic contradiction between populist discourse about crime and the ways in which crime is actually conceived and discussed by those involved in our research.

The discussions were characterised by a number of common features and similar perspectives. It was common for participants to challenge and debate key terms and concepts such as what was meant by ‘serious’, ‘crime’ and ‘community’. In debating the meaning and extent of crime respondents differentiated serious offending from more trivial or nuisance type behaviour, crime was not regarded as some monolithic concept. It was acknowledged that serious crime sometimes occurred but participants suggested it was the petty forms and nuisance behaviours that more often characterised the local experience.

Participants in all areas also differentiated problems associated with young people socialising in public spaces and the challenges posed by more insidious and serious crime. In considering crime in the local community and how the community might be defined, it was often suggested that crime was associated not with their own communities *per se* but with bordering localities or with outsiders visiting their community. When discussion turned to neighbourhood crime problems that did cause concern participants often stressed their very

localised nature and that these problems were at odds with the general character of the community. There was thus a tendency to discuss local geographies of crime and disorder in fine grained detail. The discussion centred on specific venues or locations, a particular street, park, beach or bars, during particular times of the day or night or certain periods of the year. These locations were also often associated with neglect and deterioration and thus concern about crime was often conflated with other problems.

Given crime was generally not regarded as a serious or rising problem in these communities, but was across the country, it begged the question: if not here, then where? In every case respondents cited South Auckland. South Auckland was also cited by the Otahuhu groups but they referred to Otara, Mangere and Manurewa. Other groups often cited Christchurch and associated it with violent crime, youth offending and 'boy racers'. Others cited Wellington. When we asked why these places participants pointed to the news media as their primary source of information about things beyond their own experience including crime.

Crime was sometimes recognised as a feature of neighbourhood life but it wasn't so remarkable that it was central to their mental maps of the community. Often participants didn't even use the language of crime or disorder when considering these issues but were instead framed as social problems related to poverty, lack of facilities, run-down and neglected public spaces and minor nuisance behaviour associated with young people. Participants thus made knowledgeable connections between crime and other social and economic problems. In fact crime was often regarded as a by-product of problems such as unemployment, under-employment, alcohol and drug abuse and the lack of leisure-time activities and spaces for young people. An unexpected feature of the discussions was that punitive attitudes toward offenders were very often absent. This is particularly notable since participants were drawn from the

electoral register, the same people invoked by political rhetoric about the need for tougher responses to criminals.

Conclusion

The research provided valuable insight into what people actually think about crime and, in turn, the design of crime prevention and community safety policies. Communities presented a much more complex and less punitive understanding than is often assumed. Maintaining a tough on crime approach may therefore actually misrepresent the very public opinion that politicians claim to be representing.

Communities wanted to avoid the counter-productive and very expensive criminal justice response such as boot camps, more frequent use of prison and harsher punishments. In relation to youth offending, the source of one of our most enduring moral panics, participants were more likely to suggest a tolerant and even sympathetic response. Communities were more interested in addressing and resolving those wider social and economic problems out of which crime often springs.

Government and its agencies need to listen carefully to local communities, and draw upon their fine grained local knowledge, rather than attempting to replicate some 'generic' intervention designed in the UK or Australia. Local community policing or community safety initiatives are likely to be much less effective, and less well supported, if the complexities of public perceptions and perspectives are overlooked.