

GETTING TO KNOW THE ESTATE KIDS - PROBLEM ORIENTED POLICING IN ACTION

A number of years on Patrick Wunsch, a Constable First Class at an outer Western Sydney station, recalls an experiment he tried in getting local primary and high School students to take responsibility for reducing the youth crime activity on a housing estate in his patrol.

The Villawood Experience

"In 1988 I was requested by the Patrol Commander, to carry out pro-active beat policing at the Villawood Housing Estate in Western Sydney. This project was to focus on both the victims of crime and on the offenders who resided near and on the Estate.

Villawood Estate is approximately 1 square kilometre in size. There were approximately 1000 people living in high density town houses, with 300 children under the age of 12 years. The residents, largely comprise single mothers, broken families and people on benefits and pensions. All residents fit the mix of people who could be described as being from a low socio-economic background.

The Estate was serviced by a youth worker, but had no other support services.

I had been called to the Estate on a number of occasions in an arresting capacity resulting in the usual negative reactions towards police, particularly by young people.

On my first visit to the Estate I remember going to the park (the size of a football field), located in the middle of the houses. There were about 50 children between the ages of 3 and 15. On seeing a police officer they immediately ran into their houses or into alley ways. They literally cleared the area.

Discouraged, I continued to visit the Estate three times a week, with the same result for about the first month. After this I went to the

park only on Fridays. My first contact was with 3 young people and after talking to them for about 45 minutes, reassuring them that I was not going to lock them up, we began to kick a football around the park. It took all of 12 months of constant visits before I had the trust of the majority of kids who came to the park. I gradually took on the role of a friend, legal adviser, a person to confide in, or just someone different to talk to. I suppose there was a "novelty" in being able to talk to a police officer in a non-confrontational way.

I tried a number of different contact ideas; coming there in plain clothes, trying to introduce other police to them and coming at all hours of the day and night; with both positive and negative results.

Some of the other police felt uncomfortable about not having a patrol car, or about not having a specific purpose for being in the park; i.e. no "job" to attend. The young people felt concerned too about meeting other police who were strange to them.

I began running joint projects with the youth worker (who at first was very much against my involvement). We ran youth information sessions, organised social functions, and set up a "Youth and Residents Action Group".

The aim of the Group was to inform the Estate's young people as to what we adults believed were the problems in the Estate, to seek information as to what their perceptions were and to suggest that they play a part in reducing local crime.

Almost immediately some members of the group who were involved in offending, stopped. Surprisingly these offenders influenced others outside the group to also stop committing crime.

What seemed to have the greatest impact when the whole matter of crime was discussed, was

"ownership" ("I am only a kid and it doesn't matter what I do"); "lack of action" ("I don't see the police doing anything about it anyway"); "information" ("I don't know what is going on around the place; if I don't know, what can I do about it").

The youth worker and myself had many meetings to try to deal with these issues. His brief was to work with young people 12 to 15 years. I decided to target the primary age group.

Strong links were forged with the local Villawood North Primary School. Many visits were made, children were spoken to formally in class and informally during recess and lunch time. Participation in sport and games was the easiest means of breaking down the kid-to-cop barriers. Crime prevention workshops were conducted regularly at the school.

One group at the school set up their own club

called "Kids Incorporated". They decided to accept responsibility for making improvements around the school. They began to accept ownership and responsibility for what was happening at their school.

My contact with the kids on the Estate over four years was not typical police work. It was an attempt to work with them and to gain their trust. I wanted them to solve their own problems by giving them ownership of the solutions and by helping them to make the solutions work."

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[edited from
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supplied].

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