External and internal environments of community policing

There is a growing realization that police are, perhaps, more effective in reducing fear of crime than having an unequivocal effect on actual crime figures, and a greater understanding that perceptions of police — and, in turn, perception of citizens — are a crucial component in the coproduction of public safety. There is also the recognition among public safety officials, individual citizens and civic organizations that crime fighting strategies and tactics have, paradoxically, limitations as well as potential. Yet it is still possible — or even necessary — to improve society’s capability to fight crime.

As community orientations of policing efforts become increasingly characterized by a growing willingness to move away from the cosmetics of public relations campaigns that served in lieu of cooperation, towards greater power sharing and more meaningful modes of cooperation, a need arises to examine the parameters which are pertinent to crime control efforts. Police operate within a larger environment but they also have their own. Therefore, this chapter will examine the relatively ignored characteristics of communities, police administration issues, training, interaction with other social service agencies, and the media. The chapter ends with a cursory survey of community policing efforts around the world to serve as an introduction to the more detailed description of the four countries which are the focus of this book.

Characteristics of communities

One of the explicit expectations of community policing is the reliance on formal and informal community forces to resist and
control crime on a self-help basis (Janish, 1981; Wiatrowski and Zazzi, 1987) that would consist of an extensive reliance on volunteers (Burchfield, 1983; Burden, 1988), assuming – among other things – that volunteers could be activated to reduce the opportunity structure as well as the motivation aspects of crime by making it more difficult and less desirable for perpetrators to commit crimes (Greenberg, 1977). There is also the understanding that the closer the views of police and community can be brought together, the more likely is community policing to succeed (Gabor and Low, 1973) and the assumption is that communities can be provided with maximum police protection if the ‘correct match’ of a police force to the community is effected efficiently (Loehr and Quinn, 1976). For many years the trend has been to assume the importance of the community to the process of policing in a fashion that fluctuated from taking it for granted to paying lip service to it. Rarely was there an attempt, within the context of policing, to understand better the historical, economic, political and social underpinnings of a neighbourhood, to understand its forces and dynamics and compare them to some national trends (Robinson, 1988). Relatively little attention was given to the need to understand the community as a crime-generating, and hence possibly a crime-controlling element. At best, there is little evidence that such a relationship is acknowledged. Partly this could be due to one of the characteristics of the post-industrial stage: by taking many of the traditional social roles away from the family and the smaller community where elders and the church acted as social control mechanisms, responsibility has been shifted to large bureaucracies that handle education, health and, of course, formal social control (LaPrairie, 1988; Litwak et al., 1970).

In a sense, community policing can be seen as a need to re-examine the role of communities in our everyday life. It is, of course, untenable to argue that communities were not there all along; or that communities did not generate and control crime at the same time. More than anything else, it is the way we frame our perception of the roles communities play, and, perhaps like poverty or AIDS, only when we define it as an issue or a problem, will we place it on our social and political agenda. Similarly, the ‘community’ portion of community policing received very little attention and was not placed on the research agenda in the context of policing, though much research has been done on communities