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POLICE AND THE PUBLIC

ABSTRACT. In this article two features of the theme police and the public are discussed. The first part deals with the public opinion of the police and how the police deal with the public. This is a well-documented issue, but only very generally related to ‘policing’. The problem of dealing with the public arises in very similar terms in all administrations, public services and community services. The qualities expected of a ‘front office’ (speed, competence, confidentiality, etcetera) are not peculiar to the police. On the other hand, the situation of a public policing service as an urban police force is currently very specific, has an unusual, virtually undocumented historical background and is therefore worth dealing with in much greater detail. This is done in the second part of the article. To grasp this role, one needs to consider the way in which the public police service has evolved in the last half-century. Admittedly, the situation in France has certain special features, but these are simply magnified versions of things which exist elsewhere. It may be true that the institutional background has precipitated developments in France, but that same background is present in all comparable countries.

KEY WORDS: community policing, police policies, prevention policies, public opinion

INTRODUCTION

Consideration of the relationship between the police and the public usually focuses on two sets of data. The first relates to the public image of the police in terms of reputation, prestige, confidence and/or service quality. A highly honourable image of the police usually emerges from opinion polls, in Western countries at least. Fairly typically, however, the less actual contact the members of the public have had with the police the more positive their assessment, while persons who have actually used the police service are considerably less satisfied, and in fact such dissatisfaction increases with contact with this service. This calls for a study of the basic interfaces of the day-to-day relationship between the police and the public, ranging from the more straightforward and general types of contact (answering phone calls and dealing with the public in police stations) to the more complex and specific tasks (dealing with calls, registering complaints, looking after victims and following up cases).

The first part of this article follows this traditional schema. As we go along we shall note that the rather positive reputation enjoyed by the police among the general public is not reciprocated. Although this matter is less well documented, all the specialists agree that the police force has an
extremely suspicious attitude to the public, which is usually legitimated by a feeling of systematic public hostility. The persistence of these two concurrent yet contradictory facts shows that the relationship between the police and the public comprises a deep-seated misunderstanding which we must attempt to elucidate.

This misunderstanding is partly explained by the aforementioned fact that the less actual contact the members of the public have had with the police the more satisfied they are with the force, while actual users of the police service are considerably less satisfied than the population as a whole. Consequently, the police officers who deal primarily with such users interact mainly with this section of the population, which is the most critical about police service quality. While it is possible that 80% of a representative sample of the overall population might state that they trust the police implicitly, it is also probable that nine-tenths of actual exchanges between the police and the public concern the 20% of dissatisfied citizens. So these two propositions are, partly, simultaneously valid. However, they necessitate more detailed study of both the day-to-day interfaces between the police and the public and the consequent police perception of the public.

Thus in dealing more specifically with how the police regard the public, we must take direct account of the order of, and determining factors for, priorities within the police departments. Three categories of sources of police action emerge. The police have, of course, to act on the basis of public demand as expressed by phone calls and all other forms of direct and indirect requests to the department or responses to events. However, police action is also prescribed by the political, national, regional or municipal authority in charge of police administration, which assigns the force its own specific tasks, separately from selective requests from the public (such assignments include maintaining law and order and enforcing immigration regulations, border controls and administrative procedure, etcetera). Thirdly and lastly, in the day-to-day organisation of their activities or their department’s priorities, police officers have a considerable, irreducible margin of manoeuvre, one aspect of which, besides public demand and instructions from the higher authority, concerns professional interests. It is sufficient to list these three separate driving forces behind police action to realise that they are not spontaneously co-ordinated or arranged in any clear hierarchy. The observable reality of police action is in fact the outcome of complex interplay between the permanent tensions created by these three driving forces and the requisite incidental compromises.

The second part of this article will show that these internal dynamics in police action and priorities between competing pressures and demands from