

Visiting our past leads us into the future

Sergeant Mike Ward is in charge of ACT Policing's Suburban Policing Strategy (SPS) coordination team within Crime Prevention and is known for his ability to tell a good yarn. The following article, by Constable Kate Mokrij, shows that while his version of how the SPS evolved is more colourful than the official one, it gets to the heart of the matter.

"Once upon a time," he began (as he often did), "there was the police officer who used to walk the beat. Now, this was a hundred-odd years ago, and he'd walk out the front door of the police station and walk around and find out what was going on by talking to people in the community, walking around shops and neighbourhoods, investigating crimes that were brought to his attention, often fixing problems before they turned into crime."

That was the policing style of the day. It was all about looking after the community by talking over concerns and issues and identifying ways to address them.

"The problem with the walk-and-talk model is that police could only help the people they happened to chat to in the street," Sergeant Ward said.

"The question then arose of how to make policing more efficient – and along came the call box, which was placed on street corners. The police officer could now go to the end of the street, use the phone and find out what was happening instead of walking all the way back to the station."

This new technology represented a great step forward for policing efficiency and



Above: Sergeant Mike Ward talking about the ACT Policing's Suburban Policing Strategy.

was eventually superseded by an even more effective communication tool: the police radio.

"Before you knew it, police could use the radio to talk directly to each other, regardless of physical location," Sergeant Ward said. "Of course, the next great leap was the arrival of the motor vehicle and when combined with the radio, police could cover a large geographical area as well as communicate with each other to find out what was happening in the community. They could cover miles and miles every shift, streamlining the entire policing process."

Technology had enabled policing to become reactive with a focus on attending reported incidents as quickly as possible, allowing police to attend many more incidents than could have been imagined under the old 'walk the beat' style.

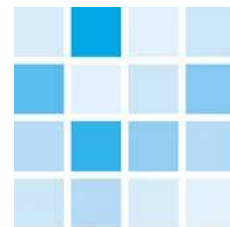
Policing as a profession had evolved from its original focus of community interaction to the new response approach.

"We felt we'd moved ahead in leaps and bounds with the increasing use of technology, and of course in many respects this is the case," he said.

"However, what technology can't do is interact with the community – the very thing that makes people feel safe."

"The bottom line is, regardless of the effectiveness of any police service in its ability to reduce crime, if people don't see police walking around the streets or if they aren't able to chat with their local constable about issues affecting their feelings of security, then perceptions about crime and fear of crime may increase."

And that's where the Suburban Policing Strategy comes into play. The strategy was implemented in the ACT a year ago and aims to combine old fashioned, country-town style policing with the new highly-effective intelligence-driven and technology-aided style of policing. Combining the two allows ACT Policing to reduce crime through efficient and



effective crime management techniques. It also helps the community feel a sense of security brought about by a strong and positive police presence.

For a complete policing package, the two styles must work together. Studies show that seeing police walking about helps people feel safe. The paper *Broken Windows* by US sociologists James Wilson and George Kelling highlights a study which found beat patrols are invaluable to changing people's perceptions about policing and crime.

"To the surprise of hardly anyone, foot patrol had not reduced crime rates," they wrote in the paper. "But residents of the foot-patrolled neighbourhoods seemed to feel more secure than persons in other areas, tended to believe that crime had been reduced, and seemed to take fewer steps to protect themselves from crime (staying at home with doors locked, for example). Moreover, citizens in the foot patrol areas had a more favourable opinion of the police than did those living elsewhere. And officers walking beats had higher morale, greater job satisfaction, and a more favourable attitude toward citizens in their neighbourhoods than did officers assigned to patrol cars."

The development of the Suburban Policing Strategy means ACT Policing can simultaneously manage crime and community feelings about safety.

Tuggeranong Station Sergeant John Giles agrees that the SPS has helped police work better with the community.

"Having an SPS Contact Officer in the station working closely with our district

intelligence officer has provided an extra channel of communication to help patrols address community problems — intelligence can be passed from the community to the SPS Contact Officer to work through, and back through the patrols to the community," he said.

"We've had the opportunity to meet with people to help address the issues that concern them before they turn in to significant problems.

"The SPS has put the local community into closer contact with ACT Policing, which has developed a greater sense of reassurance among community members. Police are engaging with the community and the benefits of this are immeasurable."

The strategy was implemented in the ACT in November 2006 after the late Audrey Fagan, then Chief Police Officer for the ACT, identified a similar system in the United Kingdom. Under their program, neighbourhood policing is at the core of the policing role. Teams are assigned specific areas or zones and are responsible for those areas.

Sergeant Ward says that when people have ownership of an area they tend to want to make a difference.

"One of the UK strategies is to clean up an area if it looks bad, graffitied or derelict," he said. "If it looks bad, it attracts bad. That's the theory and it's one of the focal points of the beat policing program in England. Police actually take part in cleaning up places and make them look habitable and friendly."

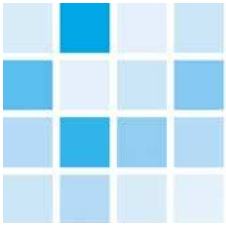


Above: ACT Policing officers on the beat

Kelling and Wilson agree, with their paper highlighting the impact of the environment on crime. "Consider a building with a few broken windows," they wrote. "If the windows are not repaired, the tendency is for vandals to break a few more windows. Eventually, they may even break into the building, and if it's unoccupied, perhaps become squatters or light fires inside."

Sergeant Ward says the philosophy behind the SPS is centred on the concept of communities working together to create a better environment.

"The SPS is taking steps towards that style of policing — what we say is you need to get out of the patrol car and interact with your community, with schools and community groups, to increase police



visibility which we believe contributes towards reducing the fear of crime,” he said.

Inspired by the UK program, Assistant Commissioner Fagan tasked ACT Policing’s Crime Prevention team with developing and coordinating a similar model for the ACT. Crime Prevention at the time really did not have control or coordination of crime prevention projects across the ACT — each station tended to run their own programs, so there was quite a disjointed approach to preventing crime.

“Under the SPS, we coordinate all crime prevention strategies across the ACT, as well as coordinating our version of neighbourhood policing,” Sergeant Ward says. “There are 22 sectors across the ACT, each made up of four or five suburbs and each patrol team is allocated its own zone to interact with, concurrently with the reactive policing function.

“This means increased neighbourhood patrolling (both by car and on foot), greater interaction with schools and greater interaction with community groups. A lot of our patrolling is done after hours when people won’t even know we’ve been there to check on them — for example every school is patrolled after hours. We’ve developed ‘neighbourhood patrol cards’ – the idea behind those is we leave them behind shop doors or in letterboxes, just to let people know we’ve stopped by.”

“It all sounds like pretty basic stuff, but the reality is that the more advanced we get in terms of fighting crime, the more we move away from the core of policing. The SPS is about bringing those skills back.”

12 months on – where are we now?

Since the implementation of the SPS in the ACT, there has been a 400 per cent increase in recorded proactive patrol activity. While no doubt proactive patrolling occurred on a small scale before the SPS, it was not recorded on ACT Policing indices. Making record of these patrols means we can better analyse our high visibility activities against community perceptions of crime.

Reviews of the SPS have shown that our renewed commitment to community interaction is starting to turn neighbourhood crime around. For instance, foot patrols of the northern Canberra suburb of Braddon revealed a trend of anti-social behaviour and thefts of (and from) motor vehicles parked within secure underground car parks. There were also traffic and alcohol-related issues occurring regularly on Friday and Saturday nights.

Many of these incidents had gone unreported because people didn’t feel the types of incidents were significant enough to call police to attend at the time, but the problem was causing unease among residents.

However, once identified through neighbourhood policing, a plan was established to help deal with the problem.

City patrol members along with Traffic, the Territory Investigations Group and Crime Prevention mounted a high visibility policing campaign, which included intelligence-gathering on criminal activity.

SPS Coordinator of the city region Constable Anna Swain said one of the most important aspects of the day was

to provide individuals and shops with information about anti-crime strategies to help them better protect themselves.

“Members attended 26 businesses within the main street of Braddon,” she said. “Businesses were provided with SPS pamphlets and cards, and were connected with the support agency Supportlink who provided business safety and other information. As a result of the campaign, Braddon residents and shopkeepers have told us they feel a sense of security they did not have before.”

Chief Police Officer Mike Phelan says the strategy is crucial if we are to make our community feel safe and secure.

“Before the SPS, the majority of Canberrans only interacted with police through the media, and media reports are generally about the ‘bad news’ stories – a burglary or assault or drug issue,” he said. “The SPS sees more police out there in the community, making people’s first contact with police a positive one, and helping to counteract the bad news, to give a more realistic picture of safety in Canberra.”

“We as police know that Canberra is one of the safest cities in Australia and has been for a long time. But when the only thing people hear is a report of a theft at their local supermarket or a fight in Civic or a broken school window, their views of safety become skewed.

“What we’ve seen over the past 12 months is a slow but steady change in attitudes. People are starting to feel safer in their homes or while out in town. And they should feel safe, because the police here do a great job.”