Winnipeg Police Advisory Board
Newcomers' Perspectives on Policing Issues
Discussion Group, Sept. 17, 2009

Meeting Format

Representatives of a number of newcomer communities in Winnipeg were invited to meet with WPAB board members and relate their experiences and perspectives on policing in Winnipeg. The format for this session was planned with the assistance of local community workers[1], and unlike previous WPAB consultations did not pose a specific set of WPAB-generated questions to the group. For this meeting participants were asked to tell their stories about newcomer interaction with the police in Winnipeg, in the process generating a list of issues, consequences and suggestions.

Executive Summary

The discussion group was comprised of 15 Winnipeg residents, most with historical roots in Ethiopia, Liberia, Somalia, Sudan, Nigeria and Ghana. Community leaders related their stories, and stories they had collected from other community members about experiences they have had with the Winnipeg Police Service. Others present told their personal stories, and those of family and friends.

"…most come from backgrounds of war and conflict, and police brutality. Many have seen family members killed, maimed, hijacked, or tortured. There is lots of fear of the system."

The stories were for the most part negative[2], suggesting that some police are ignorant of the cultural roots and historical experiences of newcomers, and of the impact an individual's prior experiences in the country of origin can have in a newcomer/police interaction in Canada. As one participant commented "…most come from backgrounds of war and conflict, and police brutality. Many have seen family members killed, maimed, hijacked, or tortured. There is lots of fear of the system."

The stories also highlighted some current police procedure that seemed inappropriate under the circumstances, as well as unprofessional and aggressive police behavior in dealing with newcomers. Some of the stories suggested illegal behavior by the police officers involved.

Community advocates report being discouraged. "I used to tell people the police (in Canada) are different. Now I can't say those words anymore. I have disbelief. I am angry and hurt. How do we restore our dignity (after such an experience)?"

"We've managed to protect our children in Africa. It's ironic that we come here and face violence"

The presenters outlined some of the problems they and their youth experience in the education and recreational systems. They noted some of their community members are unskilled, are single parents, experience poverty, poor housing and culture shock. They are aware that major improvements in all of these areas are needed to prevent crime.

But in terms of police/community relations there was a positive and sincere desire by the presenters "to move forward". They identified the strength for cooperative action which exists within their community, and were aware of the need to partner with the police in a more effective way. Participants expressed a

[1] Local agencies assisting in developing this meeting were the *Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba* and the Salvation Army's *Multicultural Family Centre*

[2] While most comments and stories were negative, there were very positive comments about individual police managers who have developed a work relationship with community workers.

great urgency to see action now, noting that there is still time to preempt criminal involvement of their youth.

The number of people in Winnipeg claiming Central African origin has increased from at least 2100 in 2001 to at least 4900 in the 2006 census year,[3] and the rate of immigration is increasing. International immigration through refugee programs is predicted to be the largest factor in population growth in Winnipeg for the next fifteen years. Strategies to assist our newcomers' transition to their new reality are required now, and will become more critical as this segment of Winnipeg's population continues to grow.

What the Board heard.

General

- Many newcomers have experienced trauma, violence and oppressive regimes in Africa
- Canada is attractive for immigration because it is perceived as a peaceful country
    - The reality for some is different…Canada is not peaceful at all because of the police
    - Third party reports were related of violence toward youth at the hands of police in Winnipeg
    - The same issues exist across Canada. People who have moved within Canada find the same concerns exist in the new city

> ***"I used to tell people the police (in Canada) are different. Now I can't say those words anymore.***

- Police exhibit what seem to be race-based actions and attitudes, directed toward both adults and youth
- Lack of respect by some police toward the newcomer community in general
- Police generalize the activities of a few to the whole community
- General harassment of black youth during everyday activities (at play, out and about in small groups)
- Police have acted on poor or erroneous information to obtain search warrants
- Unwarranted combative/assaultive behavior is used by some police officers in the early stages of a contact, or after arrest
    - i.e. stories of being beaten with a phone book so no marks are left
- It can be difficult to identify individual police officers when there is an incident
- Fear of reprisal (from police) is real for newcomers and needs to be considered by police and social agencies
    - Fear of reprisal locally
    - Fear of reprisal against family in Africa

Consequences

- The idea that police in Canada are different than in the country of origin is losing credibility with some newcomers
- Growing lack of trust of police in newcomer communities
- Newcomer community worker/advocates are becoming discouraged by the lack of progress, lack of accountability

Related Social issues

- "Collective culture" in Africa versus "individual culture" in Canada
    - Negative home country conditions are not seen by newcomers as the main source of problems here

[3] *Destination Winnipeg*, Winnipeg population by ethnic origins census 2001 and 2006. Designations of South African or Afrikaner were excluded

    - Differences in the parenting practices, especially permissiveness in Canada make it more difficult for newcomer parents to contain their youth. The youth can develop disrespect, and report their parents to authorities
- Newcomers are not a single geographic community in Winnipeg and it requires a different approach by police to build understanding and relationships with these groups
    - "virtual community" may be an important tool for community policing

…"My brother in-law (age 12) … was put in (grade) seven and back home he was in (grade) two because he (grew up) in a village where there was no school because of the war. Do you think for a minute if that (was) your child (you would) accept that?"

- The school system can contribute to discouragement and isolation of newcomer youth because of unrealistic grade assignments and language barriers
    - i.e. the school system assigns newcomer youth to "age appropriate" grade levels which often are not realistic given the skill level of children when they arrive, and with little accommodation for the language barrier that often exists
- An important asset of newcomer communities is that family structures are still fairly intact when they arrive.
    - This is an important asset
    - Few Newcomer youth have the substance abuse problems they encounter here, in the country of origin, other than alcohol.
    - Many newcomer youth are not yet involved in gangs, but they are increasingly vulnerable as time passes.

Police Policy

- Police "Standard Operating Procedures" (SOP) may have a different and more negative impact on previously traumatized groups
    - i.e. Police policy that discourages the use of bystanders as interpreter helps escalate rather than prevents conflict.

Public Complaints

- New arrivals may not know their rights or where to complain if there is an issue, and may be fearful of making a complaint
- The mechanism for complaints about the police is ineffective and fragmented
    - No feedback or confirmation of outcomes
    - Lack of consequence for police officers
    - No one body can hold the police accountable
- Being able to admit an error would go a long way toward improving relationships between police and the newcomer communities
    - Police should apologize when obvious errors are made such as searching the wrong premises
- Clear complaint procedures are required
- "Just be decent with each other."

Factors and solutions

- Working together is key
    - Developing relationships with all agencies and the community, including the police
    - A process for building relationships needs to be defined
    - Newcomers need to have equitable representation in municipal structures/boards.

- Because of their historic family and community norms there is a great capacity within the newcomer communities to address problems
    - Leaders worry that police won't participate or want to play a productive role in problem solving

Cross Cultural Training

- Recognition of their experiences in the country of origin, and its impact on individuals, is important for police officers if they are to be properly equipped to respond appropriately to community members in conflict or crisis, or just going about their daily activities
- What constitutes effective cross cultural training?
    - Meeting face-to-face with the community is likely more enlightening than a classroom lecture. Community members have specific ideas for the police on this topic that need to be explored.
- A one-time Cross-cultural training session is not enough
    - Knowledge and consideration of culture must be institutionalized within WPS and throughout each officer's career

Linkages

Point Douglas/Invitations

- The Point Douglas experience may have lessons for newcomer communities even though they are not geographically defined. The Community can be virtually defined. Newcomer groups were invited to learn about Point Douglas

Southern Chiefs Organization

- Documentation of incidents and stories is important, as has been done by Aboriginal interests. Newcomers groups were invited to contact SCO to see what has been done.
- Dealing with fear of reprisal is important to the documentation process

Winnipeg Police Advisory Board

- WPAB Executive Director will receive any further written input (stories, issues, solutions), from newcomer groups and individuals to work towards better documentation of the issues
- A police board must have ongoing relationship with the newcomer community
    - It was suggested by one community leader that Newcomers hold their own conference to identify a more complete list of shared issues and bring them forward again
    - The focus would be on the underlying issues and solutions rather than individual cases

(See also story outlines in Appendix "A" below)

Part II - Where to from here?

- A desire was expressed by many attending this meeting to create a common plan to improve the knowledge of Winnipeg stakeholders on the issues and needs for policing in the newcomer communities. A further meeting on these issues is expected.

Appendix "A"

Summary of Stories Related by Newcomers Representatives
Sept. 17, 2009

1. Police broke into the house of a Muslim woman at 2:00 am. She was not appropriately clothed according to her faith, but they refused to let her do so. Police told her to sit down. They pinned a 12-year-old boy to the floor. They had a warrant, but it was the wrong house. The woman was traumatized and humiliated. The police did not apologize nor show any empathy for the woman's situation.
2. A newcomer called police when someone broke into his house. He called police, but they walked away when they saw it was a newcomer.
3. On Saturday, mentors volunteer at a community center in a program for newcomer youth. Two patrol cars sit outside the community center and harass the youth when they come out.
4. Friday, Saturday and Sundays, police cars hang around soccer fields where newcomer youth are playing. When an adult goes to police to ask why they are there, he is intimidated and threatened with arrest.
5. A youth who had been in Winnipeg for only three days was stopped by police and searched for drugs. They used the word 'fuck'. He couldn't speak English. Was intimidated and did not know what was happening.
6. A youth, known to police had a curfew for 10:00pm. He was playing soccer. Police kept him at the field until after 10, and then arrested him for breaching his curfew.
7. Police have threatened to plant illegal things on youth so they can arrest them.
8. A youth was questioned by police about his country of origin. He answered. They asked "Is that Sudan"? He said no, and they said, OK you can go.
9. Many youth are stopped and searched without cause.
10. Many times black youth gather in groups of 2-3 on a corner, and police approach without cause, telling them to shut up, move on or I'll pull you in. If they don't, police call back-up, and some are arrested.
11. An adult stopped in a loading zone. Police officer shouted in his face, and was rude. He got a ticket and had his driver's license taken away. A Caucasian man parked in the same place was ignored.
12. Youth often charged with disorderly conduct and resisting arrest, without cause. Money has been taken by police in exchange for lesser charges.
13. Youth have been beaten by police at the station, using a phone book to prevent obvious bruising.
14. Police raided a house full of grad students. Students taken outside, spread-eagled with hands on head, all handcuffed, and stacked against a wall. Police were without a warrant. Said they had a report of weapons inside. None found. No apologies made to students. Some students now afraid to walk fast in public, afraid of getting shot outside.
15. Adult goes to Second Cup that police frequent, to buy coffee. Twenty minutes was allowed for outside parking. Police approached person and said move on, you are lucky to be in Canada.
16. Police broke into a female's apartment with a warrant and a battering ram. Woman was handcuffed. Apartment was tossed. Suspected a drug dealer lived there. No evidence found. No apologies offered.
17. Black youth arrested differentially. Parents not contacted. Youth beaten by police. Parents couldn't locate for about one week (took place in another province.)
18. "We've managed to protect our children in Africa. It's ironic that we come here and face violence"
19. African youth come to Canada without having issues of gangs or drug use. The school system is one of the biggest problems that the Newcomer youth face because newcomer children start their school here with their age group. If a child fails the class he/she must repeat the class…"My brother in-law who came to Canada when he was 12 yrs and, acceding to Canadian school system. He was put in (grade) seven and back home he was in (grade) two because he (grew up) in a village where there was

no school because of the war. Do you think for a minute if that (was) your child (you would) accept that?"… And that is why gangs and drugs are alternatives for our youth… because school is difficult for them, not because they are not smart but because they are not in the right class."

-30-