

Research for communities

Bridging the Community-Police Divide: Safety and Security in Winnipeg's Inner City

by Elizabeth Comack and Jim Silver

Safety and security are serious issues in Winnipeg's inner city. So too are poverty and racism. The processes of globalization, suburbanization, the migration of Aboriginal peoples from rural and reserve communities, and the growing numbers of new immigrants have resulted in the concentration of racialized poverty in a community where well-paid jobs are scarce, housing is often inadequate, and opportunities for youth are few. In this context, crime and violence, drug dealing, prostitution, and gang activity are among the unsurprising consequences. These problems bring the police into the community and become the source of additional conflicts.

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives *State of the Inner City Report: 2006* includes a detailed study of community-police relations in Inner City Winnipeg entitled *Bridging the Community-Police Divide*. The report is based on interviews with 45 residents and businesspeople and 17 community workers in three inner-city neighbourhoods: Centennial, Spence, and William Whyte.

Interviews were also conducted with seven members of the Winnipeg Police Service (WPS), including the Chief and a Deputy Chief, to clarify the WPS inner-city policing strategy. This publication is a summary of the larger report, which is available as a part of the *State of the Inner City Report: 2006* from the CCPA-Manitoba.

POLICING STRATEGIES

The traditional model of policing is one based on a bureaucratic and military style



of organization. Envisioning police as “crime fighters,” this model is a reactive, incident-driven one whereby police patrol neighbourhoods in cars, waiting for the dispatcher to send them to a crime scene in response to calls from the citizenry. This is currently the core of Winnipeg's inner-city policing strategy.

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The community policing model, which originated in the 1980s, involves a more proactive and multi-agency approach to service delivery, a generalist police role, and greater local community involvement. Rather than “fighting crime,” the emphasis is on crime prevention and community building. Community policing now exists in the inner city, but plays a relatively minor role.

More recently, “zero-tolerance” policing has emerged. It relies on a more aggressive style of policing and typically involves giving police increased powers to combat crime and disorder. Championed in New York City, zero tolerance policing is evident in Winnipeg in the form of “Operation Clean Sweep.”

A political ethos that demands reduced public spending and “getting tough” on crime has pushed police services toward zero-tolerance policing strategies. The impact—of both social spending cuts and a ‘get tough’ policy—has been acutely felt in inner-city communities.

THE VIEW FROM THE NEIGHBOURHOODS

What kind of policing do inner-city residents want? To find out, we conducted interviews with residents, businesspeople, and community workers in three Winnipeg inner-city neighbourhoods.

CENTENNIAL

In Centennial neighbourhood, three themes emerged. First, parents with young children are fearful for their children’s safety, and to a lesser but still significant extent, for their own safety. Second, most people we interviewed do not like and are fearful of the police, and many related stories about what

they consider to be inappropriate police behaviour, directed especially at Aboriginal people. And third, most people told us they rarely see the police in the neighbourhood, and would like to see the police on a regular basis, developing relationships with people and organizations and improving the level of trust between the community and the police.

SPENCE

In Spence neighbourhood, problems of safety and security are, according to most of those we interviewed, less serious now than a few years ago. This may be attributable to the revitalization of the community being led by the Spence Neighbourhood Association, or it may be attributable to Operation Clean Sweep.

Many (but by no means all) of those we interviewed in Spence say they like Clean Sweep because people causing problems in Spence are now less visible, and the police are more visible. However, many say Clean Sweep simply swept dangerous and illegal activities into other neighbourhoods. Most of those interviewed say they welcome a greater police presence in Spence, but want it in a form consistent with community policing, and tied to neighbourhood revitalization efforts. They want the police to work in partnership with the people and businesses and community-based organizations in Spence to remove or reduce the causes of crime, and to undertake a more proactive, sophisticated, and community-based form of policing.

WILLIAM WHYTE

In William Whyte, residents also expressed concerns about safety and security. But there

is a sense that violence in this community has become “normalized”; it is a regular feature of everyday life. This normalization of violence—and the harsh conditions that accompany it—are countered by a strong sense of pride in the community. While some residents believe that the police “try to do the best they can,” many told us that the police are slow to respond to trouble, that there is what they perceive to be a lack of respect by the police, especially for Aboriginal people, and that this includes not only racial profiling but “spatial profiling,” in which negative stereotypes are attached to people simply because they live in William Whyte. Similar to Spence, many residents were of the view that the community itself needs to take the lead in resolving issues of safety and security, and that the police should be working with the community in such efforts.

THE POLICE RESPONSE

Officers told us they entered policing to do something worthwhile, to “do good.” But they are increasingly frustrated. These frustrations have a systemic basis. They are rooted partly in the increased pressures on the police service to resolve all manner of societal problems—made worse by government cutbacks in social services, and the shortage of jobs and other opportunities in the inner city. But it also has to do with the particular logic of the policing strategy used in the inner city.

Winnipeg’s inner-city policing strategy is described as a “blended approach.” The front-line of the strategy is the general patrol officers who work in two-person cars and respond to 911 calls. In addition there are:

community police officers in some parts of the inner city; School Resource Officers in certain North End schools; various special units (eg. gang unit, arson unit); and, most recently, Operation Clean Sweep, now made permanent in the form of the street-crimes unit which will cover the whole city.

While police departments in other jurisdictions have faced budgetary restraints, the WPS has benefited from budget increases in recent years. Nevertheless, officers told us that resources available to

the WPS are limited, especially in terms of a lack of support staff to facilitate the work of the front-line

officers. It follows that the solution to inner-city policing problems is not simply an increase in the number of general patrol officers. The problems run deeper.

The general patrol officers who respond in cruiser cars to 911 calls spend their shifts running from “call to call to call.” The backlog of such calls grows ceaselessly, so that there is now a “never-ending cycle.” They almost always interact with inner-city residents in situations that are tense and conflict-ridden. As long as reactive, incident-driven policing is the core of the inner-city policing strategy, this will continue to be the case. A greater emphasis on zero-tolerance policing, as in Operation Clean Sweep

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**CANADIAN CENTRE
FOR POLICY
ALTERNATIVES-MB**

309-323 Portage Ave.

Winnipeg, MB

Canada R3B 2C1

ph: (204) 927-3200

fax: (204) 927-3201

ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca

www.policyalternatives.ca

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and the new street-crimes unit, will likely widen this divide between the police and the community, especially since the street-crimes unit will not have a citizens' advisory body and therefore will not be able to work with community-based organizations in developing positive relationships.

While the Chief and Deputy Chief were ready to admit that there were likely some incidents where police mistreatment has occurred, all of the officers interviewed said the WPS does not practice racial profiling.

BRIDGING THE DIVIDE

All of the people we interviewed for this study agreed that drugs, gangs, and violence are a major problem in Winnipeg's inner city. But that is where the agreement ended. There is a deep divide between the inner-city communities and the police service.

Inner-city residents and community workers think about inner-city issues in a community-centred way. This leads them to favour a policing strategy in which the police become part of neighbourhood revitalization efforts. This standpoint is in harmony with Chief Ewatski's comments about the need for proactive and preventative action, and his view that the WPS "can't do it by ourselves." We believe these insights constitute the basis for building a bridge across the divide.

We propose that bridging this divide will involve both a re-framing of the issue of safety and security, and a shifting of the core of the WPS's inner-city policing strategy from one centred on reactive, incident-driven policing, to one centred on community policing and community mobilization.

If we follow the current political trend to "get tough" on crime—a trend that frames the key problems confronting inner-city communities as the high incidence of drugs, gangs, and violence—then what logically follows is a move toward the kind of zero-tolerance policing strategy embodied in the new street-crimes unit. Considerable empirical evidence suggests this will not solve the problems.

By contrast, if we frame the issue as being about the social and economic conditions that lead to drugs, gangs, and violence, then we see these dangers as symptoms and we are led to seek deeper, more lasting solutions beyond "fighting crime"—solutions that have prevention as their primary focus.

An inner-city policing strategy that has community policing and community mobilization at its core is one in which the police would work in close partnership with community-based organizations engaged in a wide variety of neighbourhood revitalization issues. While not ignoring the need to make arrests and "get tough" when necessary, this approach would acknowledge and build upon the strengths of inner-city neighbourhoods. The WPS, through its beat officers, would be brought directly into partnership with the process of neighbourhood revitalization. Police officers would work hand-in-hand with the community. The police would become not an outside force engaged in conflict, as appears now to be the case, but a community force engaged in rebuilding.

*Elizabeth Comack teaches sociology at the
University of Manitoba and Jim Silver teaches*