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Police and Vietnamese-Australian communities in multi-ethnic Melbourne

Introduction

In Australia, as in Europe, the UK and Canada, law enforcement agencies have sought to use partnership strategies to calm public fears about crime, to improve confidence in police effectiveness and the legitimacy of policing authority and to promote willingness to pass information to police and to take local responsibility for crime (Wood and Bradley 2009, Hawdon, 2008; Moon and Zager, 2007; Tuffin et al 2006; Goldsmith, 2005). In the UK, such local reassurance policing campaigns have tended to centre on trust building encounters in which police officers exhibit commitment to procedural justice and by doing so persuade members of the public that authority, used justly, is legitimate (e.g. Bradley, 1998). A persistent question in this debate on public expectations and procedural justice is the extent to which partnership policing should address itself to ethnically-identified ‘publics’ that seem to display low levels of trust in police (Bradley 1998; Fountain et al. 2007; Sum et al. 2009).

Recent criminological research has indeed suggested that ethnicity (in addition to length of residency) is a factor likely to affect levels of trust (cf. Myhill and Beak, 2008; Loader, 2006). The problem for police reformers is working with the knowledge that such ethnic-based trust issues might emerge from both cultural difference (based on distinct beliefs or previous experience with enforcement agencies in countries of origin) and instances of local police practice that are interpreted as, or actually are, racist in nature. So while they
wish to denounce racism they must also promote amongst officers an understanding that in some cases it can be appropriate to take special consideration of ethnic customs, values and sensitivities, without compromising the application of the law or policing standards (Murphy et al, 2008).

These are difficult changes to make, since they challenge officers’ reasonable resistance to being seen to offer ‘special treatment’ to ethnic groups – as distinct from having an even-handed attitude to each member of the public. Such an approach also requires officers to make difficult and additional judgments in the field, determining when cultural or linguistic differences should be respected and accommodated, and when they should be screened out, as in cases where it would be racist or patronizing to address someone only as a member of an ethnic group.

The complexity of membership and affiliation, the regional character of political discourse on race and ethnicity and distinct national and regional differences in policing styles have made it difficult to develop best practice policing models in this field that might be introduced and adapted in new contexts. Broad national comparisons have struggled to identify and work through such nuanced local practices (Schafer et al 2003, Brown and Benedict 2002). More useful are rich local studies of how relations between police and ethnic groups work in practice.

These are some of the issues raised in this article, which outlines an Australian case study based in Melbourne, Victoria. The article provides an introduction to a four-year project conducted with Victoria Police and
Australian Vietnamese community groups, reflecting on the first two years of activity and including some material detailing police perceptions of the Vietnamese Australian community.

The project itself was framed by the premise that law enforcement agencies need to understand how to police and protect communities that are ethnically identified, culturally complex and apparently segregated and self-contained. This requires not only a process of self reflection on current attitudes and practices but building an understanding of the experiences of ethnic groups in relation to security and policing. Our proposition was that it will help to know more, at the local level, about how people cope with insecurity, how they see crime, how they protect themselves and one another, who they see as trustworthy, powerful and responsible and how these forms of trust fit with attitudes to police, law and formal authority. Of course, one of the challenges here is to recognize that individuals have multiple affiliations and so to research attitudes and investigate values without locking people into simple identity categories or conceptions of organic ‘community’; to acknowledge and work with the fact that the experience of Vietnamese Australians will differ according to gender, age, faith, income, occupation, education, place of origin, history of migration and current location (Thomas, 1999).

In a practical sense the project aims to facilitate increased communication between police and the Australian Vietnamese community - two internally complex groups that have a history of mutual distrust.
Context: The Vietnamese Community and Policing in Melbourne

The Australian Vietnamese community presents a prime instance of the challenge of policing ethnically identified, culturally complex communities since police officers tend to perceive it as especially open to crime, drugs and gambling, and especially closed to police inquiry.

The Vietnamese community in Melbourne is substantial, having expanded rapidly after the fall of Saigon in 1975. Between 1975 and 1995, Australia resettled more than 137,000 South-East Asian refugees (mostly Vietnamese), a total second only to the United States and per capita more than any country in the world (Robinson, 1998). At the 2006 Census the Vietnamese represented the third-largest overseas born group living in Melbourne, behind the English and Italians. Some 58,000 Melbourne residents had been born in Vietnam and a total of 71,000 spoke Vietnamese at home (ABS, 2006).

Although the numbers may seem moderate at 2% of Melbourne’s population of 3.6 million, this citywide figure conceals the concentrated nature of the population. Vietnamese speakers are clustered in four regions that centre on the suburbs of Springvale, Footscray, Richmond and Thomastown where they represent between 6 and 14 percent of the population. Three of these regions fall within the Police Service Areas (PSAs) selected for analysis in the study.

The Vietnamese have generally been viewed as ‘successful’ immigrants to Australia: hard-working, productive and committed to education, with each generation more integrated into Australian community life. But the strains of war and refugee trauma, as well as resettlement issues, including challenges to traditional patriarchal social structures, have contributed to family
breakdown, domestic violence and, for some, a a cycle of poverty and crime (Bui and Morash, 2008; NSW Vietnamese Women’s Association, 1994).

In the mid 1980s, sections of the Australian Vietnamese population in urban Melbourne became associated by law enforcement agencies with patterns of criminal activity in drugs, gambling, extortion and blackmail. Witnesses were reluctant to speak. The available information was fragmented and police lacked understanding of Vietnamese people and their culture (Phillips et al, 1987, Evans, 2009).

These issues prompted the establishment of the Bao Ve Task Force in 1985 to build community relationships and encourage Vietnamese people to report offences (Victoria Police, 1987). It resulted in a number of successful prosecutions. Bao Ve’s efforts were extended by the Asian Division, later the Asian Squad, formed in 1989 (Harvey, 1989). The Asian Squad grew rapidly to 22 staff by 1999, including a Vietnamese translator and two police with fluency in Vietnamese (Police Life, 1999). However, the name ‘Asian Squad’ was a cause of resentment among members of the Vietnamese community, and publicly criticised as evidence of prejudice on the part of police. A focus on the problem of drug trafficking as a Vietnamese concern was considered self-reinforcing – research indicated that young Vietnamese and other youth of Asian appearance were more likely than offenders from other backgrounds to be arrested by police for drug dealing (Beyer et al). Such patterns perpetuated a suspicion of authority within the Vietnamese community. Media stereotyping of Vietnamese as drug traffickers also contributed to the isolation of the community (Lyons 1995).
The Asian Squad was disbanded in July 2006, along with some other specialist squads. Several police members interviewed for this project have argued that this move meant that valuable relationships and knowledge were lost, especially on illegal drugs, since the force divested itself of a pool of knowledge and experience (McKernan and Evans, 2009).

In the last decade the move away from a compartmentalized approach to ethnic policing reflects Victoria Police’s commitment to improving police understandings of cultural diversity, to building relationships with ethnic communities across Victoria and to creating a more representative police force. The emphasis is on developing sustainable partnerships and on ‘confident policing’ and ‘community policing’ that targets local priorities and safety outcomes.

The shift to multicultural liaison and community policing has demanded new ethical and analytical skills. In their professional practice police officers are required to treat each individual whom they encounter as a citizen or equivalent, while also considering whether they should be treated with particular care as a member of a cultural group. In making cultural judgements officers must also distinguish between professionally useful knowledge and cultural stereotypes derived from personal views or values. Investigating these issues with individual officers, as we do in this project, requires organizational understanding and respect for mixed roles and multiple imperatives.

Evolution of the Study
This study evolved over years of collaboration between the researchers, police and Australian Vietnamese community members. Discussions indicated that there were low levels of communication and trust on each side. Police knew very little about how the Vietnamese community understood crime and security issues. To them, the community appeared to be opaque, uncommunicative, unlikely to trust police and unwilling to report crime.

For their part, Vietnamese community groups were willing to work more closely with police if it helped to stem the increasing incarceration rates of Vietnamese Australians, but they were not sure that police were genuinely willing to examine their own practice. Strong concerns about gambling and drugs were expressed, but there was limited confidence in the police’s ability to intervene, protect the community and prevent crime. They were also wary of researchers: some groups felt they had already been the subjects of too many social research projects. The involvement of researchers of Vietnamese origin (a professor and two doctoral students) was critical in gaining credibility, as was the establishment of a Vietnamese reference group with key community leaders. Bringing both the police and the Vietnamese Australians to the table, as research partners, was a significant achievement.

Stages of the study

The four-year research project, as it evolved from this point, entails three elements: strategic analysis; semi-structured interviews with Victorian police in three Police Service Areas (PSAs) containing high concentrations of Vietnamese Australians; and focus groups and interviews with Australian Vietnamese community groups in Victoria.
A series of 53 semi-structured interviews with Victorian police members was conducted in 2009. These explored attitudes to community policing, past experiences with Australian Vietnamese groups and perceptions of cultural differences that affect communication and cooperation. These form the empirical base of the remainder of this article. The team is also in the process of conducting a series of focus groups and interviews with Vietnamese community members. These will explore how community members perceive the risk of crime, what sorts of protection they seek and attitudes to police practices regarded as breaching trust. The final stage of the project will involve structured dialogue within and between both Victoria Police and the Australian Vietnamese community groups. New possibilities for collaboration and exchange will be identified. The project will identify policies that respect the cultural identity of the ethnic community, develop with the partners new strategies to address security issues and explore the implications for police recruitment, training and professional development.

Police Perceptions: Policing the Vietnamese Australian Community

The remainder of this article reports on interviews conducted with police in each of the three PSAs, with a focus on perceptions of common criminal activity, levels of trust and engagement, policing strategies and barriers to effective policing and security relations.

According to police, the main law enforcement challenge posed by Vietnamese Australians community is their major role in drug trafficking, especially in heroin and especially on the part of young male dealers. There has also been a recent increase in the participation of Vietnamese women in
the drug trade. Police also report increased involvement by the Vietnamese in the hydroponics growth of cannabis, in what they refer to as ‘cannabis houses’. Those Vietnamese Australians who are not directly involved in the trade rarely assist police in combating it. There is, according to police, an endless cycle of drug dealers in and out of jail and ‘back on the streets in no time’.

While historically policing of Vietnamese Australians has been dominated by reacting to such highly visible street drug dealing, one of the major challenges facing Victoria Police is implementing strategies and performance measures for policing groups that do not report crime. There is certainly a strong perception that domestic violence is a crime that has been substantially underreported by the Vietnamese community, although some police in specialist roles now believe this is changing:

More so now we’re getting a lot of family matters reported by the women of course, more so than the men. The men don’t complain about much at all, but the women are finally realising that they can complain… that’s not the way things are done… so a lot of our time is spent on family violence.

Police officer

Domestic violence often results from severe intergenerational conflict; police also see gambling and drug use as a common cause of family tension.

Generally speaking, police with experience in working with the Vietnamese community recognised a lack of trust between Vietnamese Australians and police. Police in all PSAs referred to Vietnamese Australians as dealing with crime or security issues in their own way. ‘They don’t like to talk much’ or ‘they
don’t want trouble’ were comments repeated throughout the interviews. This was reinforced by some officers’ comments on cultural concentration:

It’s a very tight community both geographically and culturally and I think that’s why they tend to have all their services. All their places of worship, all their business interests, schools, are all located within a very small area. And I guess that leads us to believe that they do look after themselves in various ways. And that’s why it hasn’t come to our attention, because no one’s asked us, as a service provider, ‘Can you come and help our Vietnamese group?’ It’s all, ‘Let’s come and help the new settlers.’ No, we do the odd thing.

Police officer

However there were some officers who felt that relations had improved as second and third generation Vietnamese Australian had grown up in Australia, leading the community to become more ‘outward looking’. One officer explains how this transition is exemplified by Vietnamese community members’ participation in local politics:

So they probably looked inwards for their own support and their own strength and who could blame them really. I think since then, while they are still fairly inward looking in my opinion, they’re outward looking in some parts of the way they relate to Australian society - I don’t know if that’s the correct term. But they’re obviously, the second generation or even some of the younger ones that came over have been educated and they’re obviously getting involved in politics as, on the council, local council there’s Vietnamese representatives.

Police officer

One of the policing strategies implemented in each of the PSAs has involved cultivating relations with shop traders as a means to manage street drug dealing. Police reported that this had usually led to increased reporting of drug dealing crimes. However, they remarked that building relationships for the purpose of gathering information, if it is seen as disingenuous, could also inhibit communication and undermine trust. Vietnamese business owners ‘did
not want trouble’, but they tended to ‘keep things in-house’. They were regarded as very unlikely to report crime to police, unless the matter was either very straightforward (a burglary with insurance implications, for example) or desperate (perhaps because of life-threatening domestic violence). Where crime involved Vietnamese, it was more likely to be reported by non-Vietnamese Australians.

Police reported similar patterns in their interactions with another major stakeholder group: Australian Vietnamese residents on the high rise housing estates. They said that residents tended not to respond to campaigns such as Crime Stoppers, possibly because they did not trust the claim that it is a confidential service. Some police doubted whether Vietnamese Australians would even know about Crime Stoppers, particularly non-English speaking Vietnamese who read Vietnamese newspapers and watch Vietnamese television channels. They indicated that community surveys, forums and community consultation exercises received a polite response but generated little feedback. Police characterized the residents as hard workers, exposed to low wages, exploitation and substandard work conditions and marginalised by lack of English. They were also seen as either directly involved in or linked to problems of drug trafficking, gambling and personal violence, or as intimidated and unresponsive. Police saw reluctance to provide information about the drug trade as understandable, given that the dense living conditions in the housing estate made it difficult to conceal involvement with police from local dealers. There were also grounds for fear of authorities, given the risk that potential informants may have insecure immigration status or pending family reunions.
One of the most significant obstacles to improved police-community relations is the language barrier. Few police officers are Vietnamese or speak Vietnamese and many indicated that it was too cumbersome or slow to work with interpreters. Undoubtedly this contributes to a second perceived barrier – understanding of the role of police.

Police officers commented that they had received many complaints from ethnically identified communities about non-response to calls for police assistance. Officers suggested that complaints tended to misunderstand the role of police:

> Of course we’re not always going to be able to satisfy a person; in terms of what they would like, because maybe it’s a clash of what we’re allowed to do. Some people may say ‘I want him arrested’, when in fact that’s an impossibility for us. So at least, if we can’t do something, then make sure that the person understands why - what the policies are, what the procedures are and that there’s a little bit of follow up for every complaint made.

Police officer

In the next stage of the study, focus groups and interviews will explore Australian Vietnamese community members' attitudes to police, community policing and careers in policing, as well as ways in which Vietnamese social networks, inside and beyond Australia, play a part in cultural negotiations of crime, security and safety.

Conclusion

We have drawn on this local example as an instance of the challenges involved in exploring the attitudes of police and ethnic communities to one another, and the patterns of attitudes, trust and behaviour that affect crime
rates and perceptions of security. Research on confidence in policing needs to be linked to dialogue and information-exchange and to a pluralistic understanding of role, identity and affiliation within both groups – those policing and those being policed. Police need to be able to understand when they should treat individual members of the public as citizens – and treat them the same – and when they need to give particular consideration to individuals as members of ethnically identified community groups, bearing in mind their historical density and current complexity.

Victoria Police is seeking to build this understanding, at the same time as it seeks to improve its organizational approach to a group that has been hard to reach and that has been reluctant to report crime and seek police help, despite the problems posed within and outside the community by drug dealing, gambling, domestic violence and related problems. Trust has been enacted from both sides, in contributing to research that now needs to be openly discussed by the partners, with practical outcomes as the end. This means exploring, in detail, in place and in practice, actions and attitudes that produce trust, mistrust, anxiety or insecurity. The project will generate new, rich sources of qualitative research on this question, working in parallel in two complex communities: Vietnamese Australians and Victoria Police.

References


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