

International Police Executive Symposium: 20th Annual Meeting

Despite the range of topics covered and the diversity of experiences based on the political, economic, legal and social dynamics of the various countries represented, there were at least six key themes that continued to surface throughout the week. The six themes captured in this summary are: communication; shared understanding; policing culture and reform; public perceptions of police; civility, equity and rights-based approaches; and, contextual awareness and social change.

Key Themes

Communication

Starting with our first keynote and continuing throughout the presentations and comments from the floor there was a consistent message that there need to be more opportunities for meaningful exchanges of ideas and information among academics, researchers, law enforcement personnel and other stakeholders in developing more collaborative, effective and sustainable strategies to respond to contemporary policing issues. There needs to be more attention paid to global and local lessons learned and creating more innovative strategies for knowledge transfer among all stakeholders. This need for more inclusive communicative partnerships comes at a time when a number of policing jurisdictions are becoming more restrictive in providing access to information that would support more evidence-based approaches to policing.

Shared Understanding

Associated with the need for improved communication is the challenge associated with developing shared understandings of concepts, strategies and even outcomes. Participants heard about unclear definitions of threat and risk even as all parties acknowledged the fundamental importance of risk assessment in managing major events. There were instructive questions about the similarities and differences between codes of conduct and measures of police performance in a time characterized by increasing demands for more transparent mechanisms of accountability. Further evidence of this need to develop shared understandings surfaced in our conversations about community policing. It became increasingly clear that differing perceptions about the efficacy and/or role of community policing may have been grounded in differing definitions of what community policing means rather than in the underlying principles associated with those definitions.

Policing Culture and Reform

There were a number of presentations and comments that spoke to the characteristics and consequences of more traditional, “closed-shop” reactive and top-down police systems. In response to what appeared to be a general agreement that this model is neither desirable nor effective, we discussed efforts to change the culture of policing through: different leadership models; recruitment strategies; in-service training; postsecondary education opportunities; and, perhaps most importantly greater, or in some cases, any transparency. While we alluded to some of the challenges associated with police reform, it was clear that there need to be more conversations about the resistance to these changes that is fuelled by the very culture that many are trying to reform.

Public Perceptions of Police

The importance of public perceptions of police was another key thread that repeatedly surfaced throughout the conference. These conversations were grounded in dramatically different contexts that would be expected given the diversity of countries represented; however, the common threads that were foundational to the importance of public perceptions were instructive. These commonalities were found in conversations about police corruption in various jurisdictions; media representations of crowd control at the G20, the Winter Olympics and Stanley Cup riot; and, the reluctance of citizens to report crimes whether that was due to perceptions of insensitivity around sexual assault or because of expectations, particularly evident in countries experiencing significant transitions, that the police were not to be trusted and even feared. All of these examples reminded us of the importance of public perceptions of police in terms of providing greater or lesser latitude for police actions.

Civility, Equity and Rights-Based Approaches

A discussion about the concept of civility as it relates to police action sparked a lively discussion with respect to the need to think more critically and creatively about our definitions of civility and order maintenance perhaps most explicitly as we were asked to think about sexual assault as a form of public disorder. These ideas about the potential for a police approach grounded in civility, equity and rights-based discourse were explored in discussions about Human Rights Advisors in the UK working more closely with police during protests, the screening and training of private security, Mexico’s safe

schools programs, and most dramatically in the handling of violence by the Hungary police in 2006 and the subsequent reforms that acknowledged the role of civil society in progressive policing.

Contextual Awareness and Social Change

It is impossible to have meaningful conversations about any of the themes captured in this summary without understanding the diversity of socio-political frameworks within which we are seeking remedies. This acknowledgement was made clear whether we were discussing the challenges in certain neighborhoods in Rio, the violence at football matches in Serbia or the barriers to reporting sexual assaults in various countries. There is a need to think about the causes and indeed appropriate interventions in relation to the historical, cultural, social, political and economic realities that contextualize these events and circumstances. This need for a more contextual and structural awareness was illustrated by the varied comments with respect to the levels of police and/or governmental response and visibility as highlighted in: the opening keynote's discussion of the police response in Rio; the analysis of police response at the G20; an examination of police responses to student protests in South Africa; comments with respect to the challenges faced by Indigenous Police Forces in sites of conflict; and, the juxtaposition of Norway's less intrusive police responses with the high visibility approaches favoured in New York. Class, gender, sex, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, ideology were all raised as critical to understanding the actions of all of the stakeholders connected to public disorder in all of its forms.

In Closing

So many of the issues and examples examined during the week reminded us how often the legal, political, economic and social policies purportedly implemented to address various public issues have little hope of any meaningful success because they are not grounded in valid theoretical frameworks. It is not unique to policing that there is incongruence between the policies invoked and the issues they are designed to address.

All of the examples highlighted above, and there were many more, illustrate the fundamental importance of appreciating the context within which we police communities and most importantly promote social change in the circumstances that are most significant in contributing to public disorder in all of its forms.