

**Community Policing: Don't believe the hype**  
By Suzanne Baustad  
Coalition Against Police Harassment and Brutality

In 1994, the Vancouver Police Board and Department announced it was adopting "Community Based Policing." Instead of relying solely on traditional "reactive" policing--911 calls and police cruiser patrol of neighbourhoods--the new "proactive" model brings the police into our communities where they are to "work in partnership" with other government agencies and residents to address underlying causes of crime. Today, there is at least one Community Policing Centre (CPC) in each of Vancouver's 23 neighborhoods--in the Downtown Eastside there are five. Consider it an occupation.

As far as policing goes, "community policing" sounds reasonable if not downright friendly. We all get together as a community and decide what sorts of problems we want the police to address and then we work together to get the job done. But the experience of community policing in Vancouver's Grandview-Woodlands area--especially with the CPC's recent move into the middle of Grandview Park, despite widespread community opposition--suggests its time to question what this model of policing is really about.

The image of community policing as a response to some sort of mass grassroots' anti-crime movement is a fabrication. In fact, when the Vancouver Police Board and the Chief Constable proposed community policing to City Council back in September 1994, they made no reference to skyrocketing crime rates or a groundswell of calls for more police involvement in communities. Little rationale was given beyond "There has been a separation from the community and from the realities of government in the 1990s." According to its own crime statistics, the number one most frequent "crime" that the Grandview-Woodland CPC reported shortly after opening the office was "audible alarms." Hardly the "crime wave" that would call for permanent police presence in our community.

**What is community policing?**

Although there is no strict model for community policing, Vancouver's program covers most of the usual bases. The Community Police Centre (CPC) is the centrepiece of the program. It is supposed to be "run by residents" and "managed in partnership with the VPD" which assigns a full-time constable to each CPC. Operated by one or two paid staff and volunteers, the office solicits donations from local businesses and runs crime prevention programs such as Block Watch. Today, CPCs across Vancouver are also funded by grants from the city and the Attorney General's office.

The CPC functions as a "home away from home" for the police working in the area who have 24-hour access to write reports, and to use the phone and washroom. It is a place for local residents to "meet your neighborhood officer" who is now on foot or on bike. But one of the primary functions of the CPC is to "gather intelligence" from residents and merchants. The idea is that most people will never make a 911 call, but would come into a CPC to offer information of use to the police.

In her report recommending the VPD proposal to Vancouver City Council, Assistant City Manager Judy Rogers said that community policing would streamline and coordinate existing city services during a period of municipal budget cuts. Community police officers are supposed to be oriented towards 'problem solving', or dealing with 'underlying' causes of crime, rather than just law enforcement. So CPCs are supposed to work more closely with other government departments such as the Ministry of Human Resources, City Engineering, and the Health Department in what is referred to as Neighbourhood Integrated Service Teams (NIST).

But beyond bringing new levels of efficiency to city services, the real selling point of community policing was to be its "responsiveness to local issues." Locals would identify issues of concern, the police would work with other agencies to call on resources as needed to help solve the problem. But the City Manager issued words of caution, alluding to the recently released, and highly critical, Oppal Commission on Policing: "It is important that all interests in the community are represented." The police were to be "responsible and accountable" for their actions. The new buzzwords for Vancouver's Finest were to be "partnership," "communication," and "problem-solving."

## **How Grandview-Woodland's got its Community Policing Centre**

One would think that any Community Policing Centre worthy of its name would have to be invited to set up shop in a community. After all we're talking about a permanent police presence in the area and the spending of resources that could be used by the community in other ways. When I called up the Britannia CPC and asked who invited them to my neighborhood back in 1995, the CPC representative told me that "a few residents" had expressed concerns about crime to the Vancouver Police Department.

Even though there were no public consultations or meetings to assess the community's position on the CPC, the VPD went ahead and secured \$6,000 in taxpayers money from the City of Vancouver and set up the first Community Policing Centre in the Britannia Community Centre (now the CPC is in Grandview Park). Not only did the City provide initial seed money, but the Britannia CPC is not charged rent by the Park Board, making it one of the few rent-free CPCs in Vancouver. You'd think with all this public money, there would have been some attempt to consult widely with the community--after all we're paying for it.

Did we need a CPC in Grandview-Woodland? According to its own crime statistics, the number one most frequent "crime" that the Grandview-Woodland CPC reported shortly after opening the office in 1995 was "audible alarms" (based on reported calls to 911). In July 1999, the top three crimes reported in the Grandview-Woodlands area were (1) theft from autos; (2) annoying persons; and (3) audible alarms (based on VPD statistics of 911 calls). In the same month, there were five drug-related arrests in the whole of Grandview-Woodlands. Hardly the "crime wave" that would call for permanent police presence in our community. Contrary to public perception, crime rates in Vancouver like those across North America have been declining for the past decade, regardless of what model of policing has been adopted. So if community policing isn't about quelling the crime wave, what is it really about?

## **The Origins of Community Policing**

The system-wide introduction of community policing in Vancouver is less a response to crime or some sort of mass grassroots' anti-crime movement than a fashion trend in policing methods. Since the late-1980s, community policing has become all the rage with police departments across North America and beyond. Most proponents attribute the basic principles to a Michigan State University professor, Robert Trojanowicz, who created the National Centre for Community Policing. Until his death in 1994, Trojanowicz spread the word by providing training and technical assistance to police departments all over the world, including Canada, Britain, Brazil, South Africa, Dubai, Japan, South Korea, India, Taiwan and Saudi Arabia.

The roots of community policing go back to the 1960s when police departments across North America were forced to rethink traditional methods of policing. In urban areas of the United States where the community policing model was spawned, African Americans were becoming isolated in decaying cities with few employment opportunities while middle-class whites moved to the suburbs. Police came to view inner cities as 'enemy territory' while residents felt they were living under the occupation of a foreign enemy. Inner city riots and other forms of civil disobedience reflected an outright defiance of police authority. The police scrambled to find ways of regaining control over urban areas and populations. In this battle for the credibility and acceptance of police authority, "community policing" took shape.

What evolved was a two-pronged 'good cop/bad cop' approach. One trend was to further militarize the police, providing them with the equipment to monitor and brutally repress particular populations. The other was to present the police as a friendly member of our communities, here to serve and protect in "partnership" with newly "empowered" residents. In the May 1995 issue of "Law and Order," a police trade journal, a leading proponent of community policing reveals the true aims of this strategy: "The military calls changing an enemy's or a population's thoughts 'Psychological Operations' or 'PSYOPS.' Community Oriented Policing does the same thing."

## **Community Policing, Vancouver style**

In Vancouver, this dual approach to policing is clear in recent attempts to increase police patrols in areas like the Downtown Eastside as well as in continuing militarization of police forces at the same time as Community Policing Centres spring up all over town to soft sell "confidence" in the police.

CPC's are not police stations we are told. But the distinction between a "policing centre" and a "police station" is lost on most when CPCs allow police to file reports--just like they do at police stations. "Neighbourhood Police Officers" are assigned by the Vancouver Police Department to each CPC. Undercover police, and local foot and bike police, are given keys and access codes to regularly use the office at all hours. There are police cruisers regularly parked beside the building throughout the day. Not to mention that CPCs work according to an operating agreement with the Vancouver Police Department "to deliver police services." Its obvious that CPCs are, like police stations, about permanent police presence in our communities.

Back in 1994 when Chief Constable Ray Canuel proposed the community policing model in the wake of the Oppal Commission Report on Policing, he clearly had the credibility of Vancouver's Finest in mind. In his proposal to City Hall, the VPD Chief argued that the success of community policing would be measured less by crime statistics than by measures of perception such as "Has fear been reduced in the community? Has the community gained confidence in the police? Does the community feel that police service is better?" A communications consultant was hired. Strategic use of local community newspapers was encouraged to increase the profile of community policing.

It is contestable, even among police scholars, whether or not community policing decreases crime. What is important from the VPD's point of view, is that it is a form of policing that increases its profile and with it the idea that the police are "doing something" about crime. But should the public be paying for a VPD public relations campaign?

In the name of efficiency, the community policing model also requires that the police begin to work more closely with other government agencies, most notably through the NIST program. But what happens is that the police begin to look like social workers (with guns), or city engineers (with guns) or health department officials (with guns) justifying bigger police budgets, while social programs and municipal programs keep hemorrhaging. And in a period of high unemployment and attacks on unions, work that would normally be done by city workers is now being done by CPC volunteers. Meanwhile, people are led to believe that issues of poverty, homelessness, drug abuse and unemployment are law and order issues and not social, health and economic problems.

### **Politicized policing**

But community policing is more than just an attempt to improve the VPD's image and the popularity of law and order solutions. In Grandview-Woodlands, we're seeing how this form of policing is highly political and acts in the interests of the few in an insidious attempt to define what our community is.

Grandview-Woodlands, traditionally a working class area of Vancouver, is the site of battles brought on by gentrification. In a neighbourhood second in poverty levels only to Strathcona, 43 percent of households live below the poverty line (and that's up from 38 percent in 1991); over 4,000 people are on welfare at any one time. Attracted by the area's "diversity," middle-class in-migration, largely from the high priced west side, has driven up median house prices in Grandview from \$199,000 to \$274,000. As middle class people buy up cheaper houses and fix them up, they attempt to protect their property values by pushing 'undesirables'--the poor, street youth, squeegee kids, vendors, prostitutes--out of the area. With their eye on middle class consumers, local businesses (many of which have survived for years on the labour, meager wages, and welfare cheques of the 'undesirables') have joined in the battle to gentrify the neighborhood. The graffitied message once scrawled on the corner of Commercial and Grandview Highway--"Welcome to the class war"--is still a fitting introduction to the neighbourhood.

In a community increasingly class divided, the Britannia CPC has taken on the role of politically organizing middle-class home owners and businesses against the poor, unemployed, homeless and youth who have

traditionally made East Van their home. The law and order solutions they promote are aimed at socially cleansing the area in the interests of property owners.

Shortly after the Britannia CPC opened in 1994, it began to actively organize the neighborhood against panhandlers and unlicensed street vendors. In May 1996, the Britannia CPC staged a community meeting. According to the minutes of the meeting, approximately 150 people attended to discuss the issues of panhandling and unlicensed street vending. Despite the fact that no one called for anti-panhandling bylaws--in fact, many people came to say they had never been harassed by panhandlers and the CPC was engaged in poor bashing--the Britannia CPC would publicly call for an anti-panhandling bylaw citing citizen concerns with "aggressive panhandling" (see the *Vancouver Echo*, April 29, 1998, p.3).

When vending came up at the same meeting, there was so little opposition to it that one participant remarked, "If there is no objection to street vendors, why is it on the agenda?" The Britannia CPC Coordinator responded bluntly, "Our office has received numerous complaints from merchants who say many of the vendors are in direct competition with them." Again, despite the lack of widespread community opposition to vending, it is no longer allowed in Grandview Park--a bylaw now enforced by CPC Park Watch volunteers. As with the panhandling issue, the CPC publicly painted the picture of a frightened public demanding action and never once made mention of the fact that many community members had expressed very different views and an acceptance that vending and panhandling are ways poor people make ends meet.

When the John Howard Society proposed a half-way house for 20 low risk criminals in Napier Lodge, the CPC weighed in heavily in favour of property owners who feared negative impacts on their property values. The Britannia CPC actively organized against the proposal which was eventually defeated. I recall being in the Britannia Community Centre reception area and overhearing a CPC volunteer making phone calls to residents, urging them to come to a public meeting to "express their opposition" to the half way house proposal. With this approach to issues, it is no wonder that CPC public meetings have been criticized for their tendency to include "middle-class, middle-aged white people" in numbers unrepresentative of the community as a whole (*Vancouver Echo*, March 11, 1998, p.3).

In keeping with VPD directives, the Britannia CPC has also made very strategic use of the local community paper, notably the *Vancouver Echo*. CPC stories run at least bi-weekly, written by or featuring CPC spokespersons or press releases. The stories promote the CPC-as-problem-solver with projects such as Park Watch or feature the CPC's role in shutting down the Pofi Bar or putting "the grand" back in Grandview Park. Throughout, CPC spokespersons promote the highly contested "broken-window" theory of policing: that if the police don't come down heavy on "nuisance behaviour" like litter, graffiti, vending, busking and squeegeeing, then serious crime will be right around the corner. As former CPC Coordinator, Valerie Spicer, put it "if you turn a blind eye to the small stuff, you're basically saying you've lost control" (*Vancouver Echo*, August 2, 1998).

In the case of Grandview-Woodlands, the relationship between local businesses and the CPC is close. The Bank of Montreal at Commercial and Broadway is a core sponsor of the Britannia CPC and other small businesses have donated everything from money to weekly chocolate chip cookies, microwave ovens and office equipment. Many businesses on Commercial Drive prominently display the name of Constable Gary Sparks and the local CPC number.

Many of the programs set up at the Britannia CPC also deal predominantly with business concerns. From the Anti-Graffiti project where businesses are offered free graffiti clean-up to BC FACS where merchants are notified by fax if 'known criminals' are working the area, the CPC serves as security intelligence for local businesses. A Business Watch program similar to the Block Watch program has also been set up for local businesses.

Besides providing such services for businesses, the Britannia CPC has aggressively attempted to organize business interests on Commercial Drive. In late April 1998, then-Britannia CPC Coordinator Valerie Spicer and volunteer Eileen Mosca participated in an "information meeting" with local businesses in an attempt to persuade them to form a business improvement association "to solve the pressing issues of used needles,

garbage, panhandling, drug dealing, and shoplifting." Speaking on behalf of the CPC, they stated, "At this point, it is clear to us that Commercial Drive would be better served if it had a strong and unified voice from the business community." (Vancouver ECHO, April 29, 1998, p.1).

Business improvement associations (BIAs), in contrast to the more informal merchants association then in existence on the Drive, tax commercial property owners to hire a full-time manager to lobby city hall. While the idea was rejected at the meeting (but later pushed through), BIAs have appeared in other gentrifying areas such as Gastown--working closely with CPCs--and have come under heavy criticism by anti-poverty activists for their ineffective and heavy handed approach to homelessness and panhandling. The Britannia CPC has also promoted the BIAs approach to poverty issues by inviting their representatives to speak on panels on such issues as panhandling and vending.

Such actions expose the narrow community interests this form of policing actually promote and raise the question of whether the Britannia CPC deserves its charitable status--which allows them to receive such funding as casino revenue--if it is so blatantly practicing advocacy. This kind of micro-policing is highly political and leads to the creation of certain kinds of communities where some people are welcome and others are not.

### **Who polices community policing?**

For all its talk about the need for community involvement in community policing, the engineers of community policing in Vancouver made sure that CPCs will never truly represent communities because they are not required to be controlled by Boards that are elected by the community at large. In addition, officers assigned by the VPD to communities are not required to live in the community and are accountable only to the VPD.

Each CPC is officially registered as a non-profit society and subject to Society regulations. A Community Police Board, chosen according to Vancouver Police Board directives, oversees each CPC. Although there is variation among CPCs in Vancouver, the Britannia Community Policing Board is not elected by the community at large but by the 20 to 30 volunteers of the CPC--many of whom are applicants to the Vancouver Police Department--who are not even required to be residents of Grandview-Woodlands. As Penny Harry, acting coordinator at the Britannia CPC explained, potential volunteers are asked to fill out an application form and agree to submit to a criminal record check which is conducted by the Constable assigned by the VPD. The Coordinator--a paid employee of the CPC--then decides who will become a volunteer and who will not.

This process ensures that there will be few voices of criticism on the Board nor is there any reason to believe that such volunteers will be representative of this community. Contrary to the "run by residents" slogan used in CPC literature, volunteers and Board members are not required to be residents of Grandview-Woodlands raising the possibility that a non-resident Board will oversee volunteers (who may or may not be residents or work in the area)--as was the case with the Mount Pleasant CPC. In any case, the Board has no control over the VPD-assigned Constable--who does not live in Grandview-Woodlands. This structure ensures a lack of sensitivity to the needs and desires of this diverse communities.

Those who do not agree with the actions or initiatives of the CPC do not have direct access to the Board. Yes, they can attend Board meetings--which are not advertised and do not include public participation--but they cannot sit on this controlling body without first "joining the club" and becoming a volunteer. This form of election may be standard operating procedure for non-profits but no other "non-profit" packs a gun, has the power to decide who can be in public spaces, or is trying to set up shop in a central public park.

Nor can those who have been harassed and abused by the VPD assigned "Neighbourhood Constable" make these officers accountable to this community. They are accountable only to the VPD--with a much criticized complaints process--not to a local controlling body such as a Community Board elected by the Grandview-Woodlands community at large.

So why aren't community police boards elected by the community at large? According to the acting coordinator of the Britannia CPC open elections might lead to the selection of people who might attempt to "railroad things" or "make the CPC look bad." This attitude suggests a profound mistrust of real community control of policing, an attitude that has railroaded many attempts to gain civilian control of police across North America.

The short experience of the Britannia CPC illustrates a few lessons about community policing. First, the real function of community policing is to micro-manage neighborhoods and, through this form of social control, create very particular kinds of 'communities' where the sanctity of private property stands above all else. And second, community policing has very little to do with crime control. Even in community policing literature, there is very little evidence that this form of policing actually reduces crime. A Labour Party official in Britain put it bluntly:

"If you read police literature you find that most forms of policing are pretty ineffective, so you might as well give people what they want, which is police officers on the beat...I wanted to push beat policing not because it reduces crime but because it increases people's acceptance and confidence in the police." (Crine, *Class and Corruption: The Politics of the Police*, Audrey Farrell, p.163).

As police attempt to gain tighter control of our neighborhoods, it becomes more and more important that we strengthen our ability to resist and our own vision of community control of police.