SECTOR POLICING THAT WORKS

A case study of the West Rand

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In December 1993, the national police commissioner issued a draft National Instruction on sector policing. The West Rand policing area in Johannesburg has interpreted this instruction creatively and ambitiously, and used it to fashion a new style of grassroots policing. This article describes the form of policing taking shape in the West Rand and the challenges facing police officials in the area.

A decade after its formation, the South African Police Service (SAPS) has settled into its own distinctive style of grassroots policing. This style is rudimentary and is fashioned to execute a narrow range of tasks. At station level, crime hotspots are identified and members of the station's centralised crime prevention unit are mobilised into high density saturation teams; they move into hotspots in numbers, throw up roadblocks, cordon-and-search, and search-and-seize. This style of policing is not so much about solving problems as smothering them in short, sharp bursts.

Is this manner of policing set in stone? Ten years into the SAPS' history, is the institution still capable of substantive innovation and creativity? The introduction of sector policing in Johannesburg's West Rand, which began in April 2003, suggests that the substance of grassroots policing can in fact change rapidly and successfully.

Working against a great deal of resistance from middle management – and a great deal of scepticism from senior managers in other provinces – the West Rand Area has, without doubt, successfully instituted a new style of policing and police culture in its 11 constituent stations. This article briefly describes what changed and how the changes were effected.

Sector policing

Sector policing is a vague and amorphous term which has been through a thousand definitions and redefinitions. In terms of the draft National Instruction issued by the SAPS national commissioner in December 2003, it entails dividing police stations into sectors and convening community–police sector crime forums (SCFs) in each sector. The changes to policing envisaged by the Instruction are organisationally modest. It envisages only that one or two personnel be redeployed from patrol and response work to set up SCFs. It is quite possible for police stations to implement the letter of the instruction without introducing substantive changes to grassroots policing.

Yet the philosophy behind sector policing is a good deal more substantial than that. The rationale for dividing station jurisdictions into sectors is to get small teams of police officials to know particular neighbourhoods intimately. The idea is not only that they will get to know their sector's crime trends well, but – with thought, innovation, and the necessary organisational support – will be able to identify the specific problems that fuel specific crime trends, and to solve or manage those problems.

Thus, while old fashioned SAPS policing would respond to a spate of vehicle thefts by throwing up

roadblocks around vehicle theft hotspots on a Saturday morning, sector policing would try to identify what in the physical and social environment caused the hotspot to emerge and how to tackle those causes. The assumption is that police members immersed in detailed, local knowledge are best placed to identify and solve problems.

It is an ambitious policing philosophy; it demands that officials who have spent their working lives following instructions begin thinking creatively. And it demands that an organisational culture driven by rapid responses to short term problems reorient itself to the tasks of long term problem-solving.

West Rand interpretation of sector policing
The manner in which sector policing was introduced in the West Rand was risky and ambitious. Each police station was stripped entirely of its centralised capacity; every operational detective and uniformed branch member was allocated to a sector. The station level crime prevention unit – historically the core of visible policing capacity, which allows station managers to police hotspots in numbers – was disbanded.

Instead, day-to-day visible policing capacity was permanently distributed into the sectors. Sector policing thus had to work because every other capacity was stripped. Either the decentralised organisation policed by solving sector based problems, or policing simply did not work at all. There was no alternative. Much rode, then, on the SAPS Area management's capacity to institute significant changes in policing culture and practice throughout the organisation quickly and on the hoof.

Yet if the vision was ambitious, the implementation was cautious. First, it was slow and incremental. The first sectors were launched in April 2003, while the last are expected to emerge in early 2005. The principle was that no sector was to be launched without the resources to sustain a dedicated 24-hour patrol and response vehicle and a permanent sector based team of at least eight uniform branch members.

The resource and personnel increases that have accompanied the introduction of sector policing have also been substantial. Roodepoort police station, for instance, had a staff complement of 180 members in the year before its first sectors were launched. At time of writing, shortly after the launch of its ninth sector, its police personnel number was 340. In Kagiso, the number rose from 134 to more than 200 over a 19-month period. Most incoming personnel were recruited directly from police college.

What West Rand sector police are expected to do
The tasks of each police official in each sector can be divided into two broad categories. The first consists of simple and repetitive tasks. The second demands thought and innovation.

Simple tasks: risk identification and targeted patrolling
Each sector gives a monthly presentation to a senior Area manager. The sector police present their monthly crime statistics and note which crimes have increased and which have decreased. They then present a map on which the sector's crimes are plotted. Crime increases are thus marked not only by type, but by geography, time of day, and day of the week. Hotspots are marked in red. Each is discussed individually – how it was policed last month, how it will be policed next month.

The first stage in this exercise is rudimentary and routine – it is about how to design targeted patrols and police risk factors. If the sector's primary problem is gun related predatory crimes, the sector is expected to conduct serial stop-and-search procedures in the vicinity of the hotspot at the times of day and days of the week at which the crimes are concentrated. If the sector's problem is residential burglary, the area is mapped for hotspots, access routes and open fields. Vehicles and pedestrians are to be serially stopped and searched at appropriate times and places.

The evaluation of members' enthusiasm in performing targeted patrols is rudimentary but stern. The name of each member is paraded before the meeting, together with a list of the arrests he made and the goods he confiscated the previous month – all on a Powerpoint presentation. If a sector's violent crime has increased, the rate of arrests for

drunkenness is low, and the number firearms it has confiscated is paltry, it is performing its most basic functions poorly and is told so. Alternatively, if a member has only arrested illegal immigrants, and cannot explain why targeting them is reducing identified crime patterns, he is told he has been wasting his time.

Complex tasks: problem-solving
Once hotspots have been mapped, the sector manager presents a photograph of each hotspot. The idea is to understand each hotspot as a physical and social terrain, and thus to attach its crime patterns to specific problems. Members are encouraged to find environmental and situational causes of crimes in hotspots and to offer target-hardening solutions. They are also obliged to record how many civilians and civilian networks they have contacted in hotspots, how they have approached them, and what sort of crime prevention partnerships they have established with them.

Members must present a list of physical and social factors throughout their sector that might contribute to crime. These can range from broken street lights, to unnumbered houses, the emergence of a group of homeless children, the presence of street gambling, unlit open spaces, the presence of vacant houses, the opening of a taxi rank, and intermittent power failures, to the emergence of a kangaroo court in an informal settlement. Each factor is discussed individually and solutions are proposed.

Members are also obliged to search for these factors by communicating with civilians. Members must list how many civilians they contacted during the previous month. They are also obliged to distribute their dedicated sector cell phone number, and to encourage residents to use it to lodge complaints and to give and receive information. Finally, the sectors are obliged to report on the composition of their SCFs, the problems raised there, and the solutions it has proposed.

Sector performance
The Area office's expectations of what should happen at the grassroots level are in reality pretty modest. A sector that performs its rudimentary functions well – risk identification and targeted

patrols – is considered by Area management to be doing alright. A sector that has begun to dissolve its hotspots into specific problems with specific causes is considered to be exceptional. Sectors that are slow to dissolve their hotspots into identifiable and actionable problems are painstakingly coached in the monthly meetings with Area management; Area management grills the sector team until it begins to think about problems and solutions.

The research showed that most, although not all, sectors performed risk identification and targeted patrolling with competence. Every sector attempted to problem-solve, some with more success than others. Successful problem-solving was always conceptually very simple, but was extremely labour intensive and required a great deal of dedication and determination. Here are two examples of successful problem-solving:

• In Roodepoort, a spate of night-time street crimes and disturbances were associated with a particular neighbourhood tavern. The sector manager attempted a host of measures to badger patrons and the owner, from successive raids, to constant breathalizer tests outside the tavern, to stringent enforcement of licensing laws. Finally, after painstaking work, the sector manager discovered that the tavern proprietor was several months behind in his rent. The owner of the property was contacted and pressured into issuing a final demand. This was done, the tavern proprietor evicted and the tavern closed.

• Kagiso police station's sector four identified a pedestrian passageway on which people were repeatedly robbed. Sector patrol officers surmised that the perpetrators were among three groups that regularly held dice games in the streets around the passageway. They periodically broke up groups of gamblers and arrested them on petty offences, but they knew that this was more of a cat-and-mouse game than a lasting solution. They believed that the best course of action would be to link specific gamblers to specific crimes. They profiled four or five gamblers, collected all the dockets of robberies committed in the passageway and re-

interviewed all complainants. Through this process, charges were laid against four of the people they had profiled and all were convicted. The robberies in the passageway stopped.

Policing challenges
The introduction of sector policing in the West Rand has led to qualitative changes in the relationship between police and civilians. First, police officers get to know a neighbourhood's victims and complainants personally and *visa versa*. Second, as police responses to complaints become quicker, more efficient and more predictable, civilians begin to draw police into a wider range of conflicts. These qualitative shifts in the relationship between police and civilians have both benign and destructive consequences.

Mutual escalation
For those who do not want a police presence in their neighbourhood, knowing officers individually becomes a powerful tool. Police officers can be repeatedly provoked until they break the law, or sufficiently intimidated to desist from patrolling certain areas. In one instance in Randfontein, it appeared that this relationship of personalised, mutual hostility rendered the very presence of the police a provocation, and led to the escalation of tension, the commission of crimes, and the diversion of police resources from other areas.

It is difficult to offer solutions to this problem. It is, perhaps, an inevitable by-product of sector policing. The police must inevitably respond by targeting provocative individuals for action, but this is precisely what provocative individuals want. Police resources are diverted into continuing, low-intensity conflicts.

Informal delict
As sector policing brings a surer and more predictable police response to complaints, so it is likely that civilians will increasingly use the justice process as a form of surety – as a means to underwrite systems of private and informal delict. In other words, a victim will privately and informally 'sue' an offender and then call the police to open a case. The justice process is kept in the wings, to be triggered in the event that the offending party

reneges. Police officers resent this syndrome immensely. They regard it as a corruption and abuse of their work.

But in the absence of a sudden and unlikely transformation of local cultures, this syndrome is likely to remain, and sector officers will have to manage it. What to do with it? It has both benign and malignant possibilities. At its worst, it drags officers into the tardy role of unwilling and unwitting debt collectors. It forces officers to respond to complaints which have been fabricated for the purposes of blackmail and extortion. Yet, at its best, police officers will assist in underwriting informal systems of non-violent conflict resolution. Thought should be given to how to realise this latter possibility.

Domestic violence
A surer and more efficient police response to complaints is probably also resulting in victims of domestic violence calling the police with greater frequency, and in the same officials being called to the same addresses again and again. Within the ambit of the law, a variety of different *modus operandi* remain open to police officers responding to domestic violence complaints. The manner in which this discretionary space is filled is often shaped by the officer's character, values and beliefs:
- the degree of contempt with which an officer treats an offender in front of his family;
- whether, and with how much urgency, an officer persuades a complainant to lay charges, or, alternatively, to seek a protection order;
- to what degree the presence of children in the house changes the officer's behaviour and demeanour;
- the extent to which an officer is concerned only with whether a crime will be committed on his shift, rather than the long term consequences of his actions.

Research in other parts of the world shows that all of these aspects of an officer's demeanour at the scene of a complaint either exacerbate or ameliorate domestic violence.[1] The research is context-specific and its findings cannot simply be transferred from one environment to another. In South Africa, research on police conduct in private

homes is scant, and police management is thus not in a position to write policy in this regard.

Now is probably a good time to begin that research. As sector policing increasingly brings police into intimate contact with civilians, much more should be known about the long term consequences of an increased police presence in conflict-ridden homes.

Conclusion

To the extent that the introduction of sector policing on the West Rand has been a success, four factors have made this possible:

- Institutional reform was far-reaching and ambitious, and central capacity was stripped. The organisation had no choice but to get sector policing right. Falling back on traditional styles of policing was not possible.
- The Area management corps has grasped the concept of sector policing with enthusiasm, rather than having it thrust upon them. The importance of this point cannot be emphasised too much. In most provinces and areas, sector policing is to emerge from a National Instruction. There is no guarantee that it will be received by a willing corps of police leaders.
- The transition has undoubtedly benefited from the fact that a large proportion of sector personnel are recently recruited police officers. Sector policing is their first and only experience of policing which means there are no old ways to be unlearned.
- Veteran middle-ranking police officers' first experience of sector policing has come in the form of a dramatic increase in resources and infrastructure, and a vastly improved managerial support system. In other words, sector policing has been coupled with unprecedented improvements in the conditions of their working lives and in their capacity to perform their work.

The combination of these four ingredients appears to have been pivotal. Take one of them away, and the introduction of sector policing may well have been beset by a host of problems.

This article is drawn from a monograph on the same topic: J Steinberg, *Sector policing on the West Rand: Three case studies*, ISS Monograph Series No 110, Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria, Dec 2004.

Endnote

1 See, in particular, L Sherman and D Smith, Legal and Informal Control of Domestic Violence, in *American Sociological Review* 57, 1992, pp 680-690.