

THE DEPLOYMENT OF MOBILE PATROL VEHICLES: HAVE THEY MET THE EXPECTATIONS OF THE MALAYSIAN PUBLIC?

SivabalanSuppiah¹

ABSTRACT

As part of the Royal Malaysia Police's (RMP) vision to adopt community policing among its future policing directives, mobile patrol vehicle (MPV) roles were reoriented from traditional crime control to a preventive form of policing that requires officers to establish rapport with those who live and work in their patrolling areas. In this article, the effectiveness of MPV deployment is explored as a strategy used by the RMP to reduce crime rates and to reduce negative perceptions towards the police force by the general public. The study is also intended to examine potential issues faced by MPV personnel in their line of duties since the inception of the Department of Crime Prevention and Community Safety (DCPCS) in 2014. Data were gathered through interviews with a small sample of respondents from both the community and the police service. Little research has been done in this area, and therefore this study might provide the stimulus for subsequent and more conclusive research.

Keywords: *Community policing, Mobile patrol unit (MPV), Police officer, Community members, Royal Malaysia Police (RMP)*

1. INTRODUCTION

Almost every scholar in the law enforcement field of research calls for the community policing model to be implemented as it is seen to be the future of policing (Mastrofski, Willis, & Kochel, 2007; Oliver & Bartgis, 1998). Although community policing promotes community engagement via problem solving, it does not change the core objectives of the police functions, namely prevention and detection of crime, upholding law and order, and protecting individual rights and freedoms (Bayley, 1986, 1989, 1994; Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), 2006; Skogan, 2003, 2006; Skogan & Hartnett, 1997). Community policing does, however, assist the police in achieving those objectives more effectively and with professionalism.

¹ DSP Dr.SivabalanSuppiah is a senior police officer at the Department of Crime Prevention and Community Safety, Royal Malaysia Police, Bukit Aman. Email: sivabalan@rmp.gov.my

Community policing is not confined to a singular definition, but is wide ranging. Most often, it is described and defined in ways to meet the national policy of a particular country. For the purpose of this article, however, the definition provided by The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has been chosen to describe community policing as:

"A philosophy and organizational strategy that promotes a partnership-based, collaborative effort between the police and the community to more effectively and efficiently identify, prevent and solve problems of crime, the fear of crime, physical and social disorder, and neighbourhood decay in order to improve the quality of life for everyone (OSCE, 2008)".

Since 2008, the Royal Malaysia Police (RMP) has undertaken significant evolution in strengthening community policing as the model for the practice of policing. This transformation includes revamping existing department vision and mission statements, restructuring departments to accommodate crime prevention strategies, the shift of communication from top-down in the police hierarchy to emphasise a more bottom-up approach, and the introduction of many programmes that are community centred (Hassan, 2007; Kadir & Jusoff, 2009; Royal Malaysia Police, 2008). With these initiatives, have come the reorientation of mobile patrol vehicle (MPV) traditional roles and functions.

It is important to recognise that MPV units in the RMP are not completely new. They had existed in the police force for many years. The first MPV car model introduced in the RMP was the Austin Princess (1964) and the car models used for MPV functions have evolved over the years: Holden Premier Sedan (1964), Alfa Romeo Alfetta 2.0 (1980), Proton Saga (1985), Proton Wira (1993), and Proton Inspira (2011). These MPV units were part of the Department of Internal Security and Public Order (DISPO) and served as a primarily reactive policing in that officers responded to a variety of situations as they developed (Sparrow, 1988). Since 9 June 2014, however, with the introduction of the Department of Crime Prevention and Community Safety (DCPCS), MPV functions were reoriented to meet the philosophy of community policing. According to RMP (2016), some of these functions include:-

- i. creating fixed geographic sectors with a permanently assigned patrolling team;
- ii. increasing patrolling within the sectors to increase omnipresence of the police;
- iii. reorienting patrol activities to emphasise nonemergency duties;

- iv. public engagement and
- v. pro active (and reactive) policing strategies.

In recent years, public perception towards the police department and crime rates in the country have improved, but these achievements are far from reaching the goals set in the *National Blue Print on Security* (Government Transformation Plan, 2010). The public at large still holds a negative image about “safe feelings” despite a continued downward trajectory in crime rates. It was reported in the Government Transformation Plan (GTP) 2.0 that 52.8% of the community still do feel not safe.

This article, therefore, will focus on both the effectiveness of the MPV deployment as a strategy employed by the Royal Malaysia Police to reduce crime rates and reduce negative perceptions about the police force by the general public. In addition, this article is intended to provide an examination of issues faced by MPV personnel in their line of duty since the creation of the Department of Crime Prevention and Community Safety (DCPCS) in 2014. Data were gathered through interviews with a small sample of respondents from the community and police service.

2. METHODOLOGY

Ten members of the public and ten officers attached to the MPV units were selected so that age, experience, ethnicity, and gender were matched for each group. In unstructured interviews, they were asked their current experiences concerning MPVs and police efforts in embracing community policing. It was decided to use unstructured interviews because they can generate qualitative material about respondents’ thinking processes and justifications (Wakefield, 2006). This study was conducted between the months of January and June this year. Although interview questions were not prearranged, the following key themes were addressed:-

- i. MPV and community interactions;
- ii. MPV and effectiveness with regard to crime reduction;
- iii. MPV and response time;
- iv. MPV concerns within and outside operational climate;

3. FINDINGS

Findings of this study were divided into citizen perspectives and MPV officers' perspectives. Generally, the findings received from both groups were positive and the public is strongly encouraged by the police performance in general, particularly in police, building greater rapport by demonstrating genuine interest in better understanding of the community needs. It was also recorded that crime has reduced significantly in recent years since the inception of the DCPCS.

3.1 Citizens' Perspectives

According to the 10 members of the public, police have shown great efforts in building their relationship with members of the community. They have increased patrolling efforts by both number of officers and frequency of patrolling. Police were also perceived as being serious about handling social issues such as gangsterism, bullying and sexual harassment in contrast to the past when action was only taken once the problems were reported. This provided evidence that police have moved towards a proactive approach in tackling local issues concerning communities.

On the other hand, however, the public has yet to be convinced about the increased presence of the police. The police personnel are not seen to be friendly except on a few occasions when they were asked to take photographs for record purposes. Most community residents indicated that except for those actively engage with the police have reservations in taking photographs with the MPV personnel though they were clearly informed of its intentions. The expectations are more for friendly, familiar and trustworthy officers. Often, community members in the sectors assigned to particular MPV units are not able to distinguish their sector officers even if they acknowledge seeing them patrolling in their neighbourhoods. This demonstrates that some of the MPV personnel have not made themselves known or have not engaged with the public. Furthermore, it was also mentioned by some respondents that the patrolling hours are highly predictable and that police are most often seen only on the main routes.

MPVs have also been identified as not complying with regulations set under the Inspector General Standing Instructions on MPV (RMP, 2016) especially during routine stops and checks. Interviewees referred to a number of occasions in which MPV personnel acted suspiciously when they questioned the public in isolated areas by not exiting their vehicles to make themselves completely

visible. Reference was also made to officers often being rude. This indicate that monitoring mechanisms of MPV units are not sufficiently in place, thus providing opportunities for inappropriate behaviour. Lack of basic communication skills and local knowledge about the sector that the MPV units are mobilised in were highlighted by several respondents.

The community members also indicated a lack of support from the police team at times of emergency. The community members again expressed their disappointment with the MPV for not pursuing illegal immigrants within the community. Again, according to them a similar situation applies to illegal business operators as these forms of business (illegal liquor, gaming, and licensed money lenders) are being operated not only in close proximity with schools and local housing but also being operated openly. In addition, the public members raised concerns about the number of illegal car repossessions. They said that illegal repossessions can become unruly against unsuspected individuals. The concern of the public is how car repossessions operate if the police have little knowledge about people's operations. The public respondents also highlighted their concern about cars with heavily tinted windows and registration plates that do not comply with regulations. Several respondents questioned the sensitivity of the MPV officers in earmarking these offenders since they are individuals who are likely to be affiliated with criminal enterprises, gangs and syndicates. If they were to conduct frequent road blocks, serious criminals using fake number plates could be apprehended.

3.2 MPV Officers' Perspectives

There was a general view among MPV personnel that huge responsibilities are being placed on them since the inception of the DCPCS in 2014. Majority of the officers interviewed raised their concern about being over-tasked with responsibilities.

According to several officers, apart from routine patrolling (including *roles associated with the Mobile Information Centre, the Mobile Bit Base, Face-to-Face reporting, and Stop and Talk activities*) within an assigned sector, they are required to respond to calls made via two-way radio communication with the District Command Centre (DCC) / Contingent Command Centre (CCC) and Malaysia Command Centre (MCC) when emergencies arise.

Usually, MPV units are the first responders at the scene of crime or an incident, and they must remain at the scene until support arrives from other police units

before they are permitted to return to their designated sectors. As the waiting period for MPV may differ due to various reasons such as communication break down or long travel distances, MPV members frequently have to deal with the situations alone and abandon their routine patrolling duties. In addition to all these responsibilities, respondents have also indicated that far too often they are deployed in community engagement programs. This tends to result in the spread of the unit's core function of patrolling too thinly.

Officers also said that a negative consequence following the inception of DCPCS was that all crime prevention and community safety related programs such as dialogues, talks and campaigns with the community were completely pushed to the DCPCS responsibility. Furthermore, interviewees highlighted that they were often placed in conflicting positions if they have to deal with criminals and victims simultaneously, especially in situations involving critically injured victims. Saving lives is a priority for all officers, and therefore preference must be given by any officer to protect the victims over apprehending offenders. Often, failure to apprehend offenders first is perceived negatively by onlookers and this places enormous pressure on MPV personnel. Typically, lack of support from within department personnel creates further anxieties and depression among the MPV personnel.

In a usual arrangement, two officers are assigned together in an MPV. Having to do rounds for eight hours, a shift places huge amounts of stress and this stress escalates especially when performing patrols on a hot day. The conditions are made worse when there are traffic congestions. This is a common scene particularly in urban areas and spending many hours on the road is an extremely agonising experience. When came as a question about the age of personnel who are assigned to the MPVs, interviewees indicated that most MPVs are manned by personnel from a wide range of ages, from the youngest of recruits to those who are about to reach their compulsory retirement age of 60. They, however, added that those personnel who are close to and above the age of 50 might not be the perfect fit to perform high demanding roles like those of the MPV units. In relation to women officers' participation in the MPV unit, this could not relate to any known cases in the RMP that deploy women personnel to this role.

4. DISCUSSION

The public finds the patrolling unit's movements are often predictable. They move in a scheduled time frame that defeats the purpose of random patrols.

Waddington (1999) stated that through meetings with respondents from socially deprived neighbourhood, the majority feels that the police are biased and sidelined. This is a common perception of socially deprived neighbourhood towards the police as similarly recorded in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia. The needs of the police personnel to account records of their meetings with the public is clearly understood. Therefore for this to materialise, the MPV personnel must engage more with the community they are assigned to on a regular basis so that a good rapport is forged between the local officers and the community concerned.

As Wakefield (2006) reported, the public seek a certain policing style in order to feel confident and comfortable, rather than merely seeing the numbers of police present. These are the simple things the MPV personnel should engage in rather than just doing rounds in their patrol cars. Once the trust is built, (human) intelligence gathering could be easily established thus facilitating policing work and making it more effective. As one sergeant from the Calgary Police Service (Canada), Chris Ogwal said recently in an interview, "It takes time, commitment and dedication to build those relationships with the store owners, to get to know them... You'll get a lot of information from them, believe it or not" (Passifuem, 2017). As part of future improvements, technical aids (e.g., miniature video recorders) can be considered to be fitted on MPVs and on MPV personnel to track and record all meetings and movements. Although this initiative may be costly, the long-term return is undeniable.

Community policing may be one way to go about implementing policing in a democratic environment. However, in reality most of the police departments are relatively understaffed, thus making it difficult to arrange for extra shifts. In taking care of the welfare of the men and women on the ground, the higher management of the RMP can also consider the possibilities of shorter hours of duty with increased shift rotations to provide the officers enough time to rest and recover. This in a way will help to increase the efficiency of the MPV personnel in performing their duties.

A number of studies have shown that patrolling an area without a definite focus on the "hotspots for crime" has shown no effect in crime reduction (Sherman & Eck, 2002; Weisburd & Eck, 2004). Therefore, MPVs have to plan their patrolling sectors by providing more rounds on the ground in these areas for improved determent of criminal acts. Some would argue that selective patrolling may result in crimes shifting to another area, often referred to as "crime displacement". This view, however, has been challenged by a study conducted by Bowers, Johnson,

Guerette, Summers, and Poynton (2011) who indicated that a directed form of patrolling does not conclusively result in the displacement of crime, but brings benefits to a wider area of the targeted sector instead – referred to in the literature as “diffusion of benefits”.

Having the right men for the job is a key ingredient in getting things right, and the same can be anticipated for MPV units. The officers for the job should be well trained, knowledgeable and have necessary skills to handle a variety of issues concerning the community. Every sector is unique by virtue of geographical landscape, the demographics of the residents, economic features and social order. Therefore, MPV personnel must be sensitive to local needs and concerns. Mature and thoughtful officers are required to handle issues of concern delicately and should be able to make rapid decisions. Often, those who are assigned to the MPV duties are junior officers in the ranks of constable, lance corporal, corporal, and sergeant. They are the front-liners who operate in close proximity with community members. If these officers are not properly trained and competent in dealing with the public demands and issues, it is highly likely that such situations will become controversial and potentially tarnish the good name of the police force.

Misconceptions about MPV officers are likely to exist partly because the public lack knowledge about police roles. Most members of the public have a general perception of the nature of police personnel activities. However, within the overall police department there are numerous sub-departments and certain personnel are designated to specific tasks, e.g., crime investigation, narcotics investigation, crime prevention, special branch, and traffic investigations. Similarly, MPV units, which now fall under the administration of district level of the DCPCS, have their specific responsibilities. However, members of the public perceive that all police officers have responsibilities across all situations including mental health, truancy, and alcohol-related issues; illegal businesses such as gaming machines; prostitution; illegal immigration; and many issues that are in the purview of other authorities such as local councils and the Immigration Department of Malaysia.

Lack of knowledge about the police department places unnecessary expectations, and failure to address these misplaced expectations results in the continuity of negative perceptions towards the police department as a whole. This indicates that the public must be educated about policing roles and functions. It might be good to invite public members to visit police stations on a regular basis to keep themselves well informed of present strategies and planning conducted by the local police for the benefits of the community. Furthermore, it would give some

level of exposure to the public in understanding better the working conditions and limitations of the police force.

Collaboration with local agencies has to be improved considerably and more joint enforcements have to be conducted to ensure every angle of community concern is addressed. MPV units alone cannot be held responsible for undertaking these collaborative efforts since many of these personnel are junior ranking individuals. The heads of every police departments within each district must play a role to accommodate and simplify MPV duties.

The factors like age, gender and experience are three demographic variables that were identified by interviewees as significant in identifying the best candidates for MPV activities. Although no statistical tests were conducted in this study to prove this notion, these variables were important according to the interviewees. The officer for the job should be neither too young nor too old. Being an MVP officer requires physical strength and agility to respond to situations. However, having younger personnel to man the MPVs may also contribute to negative impressions due to their perceived immaturity. Similarly, lack of policing experience may result in wrong decision making and potentially lead to legal complications.

Research needs to be conducted to determine appropriate age boundaries for personnel who are assigned MPV duties. A blend of experience and age may result in improved service and efficiency. As a culture of having only men for MPV duties might have limitations, female officers should be given equal opportunities to demonstrate their abilities in handling community issues. This is especially pertinent when victims are women or when a young girl needs help. Women officers are also known to make better judgments and critical decisions as their feminine approach aligns well with the community's sense of sensitivity and emotional intelligence.

When a police department embraces the philosophy of community policing, every facet of the police organisation must embrace the concept not just those attached to a particular department such as DCPCS. This is a revelation to which the top management must take into account seriously. It must be made clear that DCPCS is a department that is established to coordinate and commission all community related programs, but the responsibility must be shared by all departments and personnel. Otherwise, community policing principles will not be seen as a department-wide implementation in the RMP but applying to only a small branch of the larger organisation.

5. CONCLUSION

This study was intended primarily to obtain information about the effectiveness of MPVs in the RMP in the eyes of the Malaysian public. In addition, the study was intended to identify concerns faced by MPV personnel in delivering their responsibilities to the community as part of the reorientation of roles and functions after the inception of the DCPCS in 2014. Since this research is exploratory in nature, the findings do not offer comprehensive solutions to existing problems but merely identify the nature of the problem. Nevertheless, the findings can provide a foundation for future research as they can help in determining the research design, sampling methodology, and data collection method (Singh, 2007).

According to Passifuem (2017), it is no cliché that in policing, the best defence really is a good offence, where MPV units can act as an overt, visible and mobile police presence that is uniquely equipped to keep order on the mean streets of the city – representing how very old law enforcement philosophies can successfully deal with a very modern problem. The existence of MPV units is indeed significant, and despite some of the concerning issues raised by the community members, those units cannot be regarded as a failure. Notwithstanding that, the data gathered through this study do provide some useful insights that can be put to good use in improving the prevailing system so as to be able to acquire a better overall image for the RMP.

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