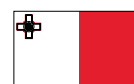


Community Policing in Malta During COVID-19

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Abstract

Community Policing (CP) was introduced as a pilot project in one of the coastal localities in the north of the island in July 2019, with a view of expanding it to other localities by end 2020. The onset of COVID-19 in March 2020, with its subsequent lockdowns and prohibitions, threatened the future of this project in more ways than one, at least on paper. However, in practice, the initiative continued to thrive, to the point where Community Policing was introduced in another 11 localities around Malta by September 2020 with a view of expanding it to another 9 localities. This paper looks at what could have made this initiative successful in spite of all the odds affecting both community and policing. The research involved 90 hours of fieldwork covering street patrol observation and unstructured interviews with the Community Police leaders and most of the officers in 12 localities over three months. This paper evaluates the main issues shaping the project on paper and in actual practice, and how the two fundamental principles behind it – community building and proactive problem solving – survived the pandemic and also managed to overcome clashes encountered with the traditional police culture of the command and control approach at the district level.

Keywords: Community Policing, Malta Police, COVID policing

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Background

Community Policing (CP) was first introduced in Malta in July 2019, as a result of a public commitment outlined in the Malta Police Transformation Strategy 2020-2025. The brief promised “to provide a professional and trusted policing service to ensure safety and security in partnership with the community.” The intended objectives were threefold: “increased trust” in the police service, transforming the service into one that was a “flexible, efficient, and community-centric” service whilst fostering “effective and efficient leadership and management” styles.

It started initially as a pilot project in Mellieħa, a small town of 11,823 residents on the north coast of the island, with the intention of expanding it to another 11 localities a year later. However, COVID struck eight months into the project and Malta went into the first national lockdown in March 2020. This paper intends to outline the challenges faced by the project and trace its baptism of fire. The reasons behind the decision to start from Mellieħa, to then expand to selected localities, the reason for community policing starting in 2019 will be discussed in a separate paper.

The concept of ‘community’

Before this project, the term ‘community relations’ was used sparingly and often misused as a synonym for public relations. In November 1997, because of an internal police reform that started in June 1996 and lasted for about 24 months, a new unit was set up with the intention of enhancing relations with the public. It was called the Community and Media Relations Unit, (CMRU)³, and which catered for two main activities: a contact point for the media with regards to police and crime news, and community promotion, largely through educational campaigns and especially school visits⁴. The Unit was also serving as crime prevention programme dissemination point and at the time was the driving force behind promotion of community strategies such as Neighbourhood Watches.

Towards 2015, an attempt was made to introduce ‘Tourism Policing’. Again, the emphasis was on Mellieħa, but this time round the focus was mainly on beach patrols, where there was such a touristic feature, and patrol in the historical areas such as Valletta and Mdina that was aimed at improving the image of Malta as a tourist destination. The participants were even trained at an institute specialising in the tourism industry. However, the effort only lasted for approximately two consecutive summers. With the benefit of hindsight,

3 One of the authors, Dr Mary Muscat, used to be a police inspector and the first manager of this unit.

4 CMRU staff received training at the Grampian Police at Aberdeen College of Education in Scotland. This included a month of lectures and undergoing supervised assessments by making presentations in different schools.

the effort looked more like an ephemeral political decision that was followed blindly without any substantial internal or external review, making it look more like an experiment rather than a model of policing.

The spread of COVID-19 could easily have spelt the end of the Community Policing project, with officers recalled and re-assigned to enforcing the new pandemic regulations and assisting frontliners in other aspects of such enforcement. On 13th March 2020 schools, childcare centres and University were closed, together with non-essential services. This partial lockdown went on until June 2020, with educational institutions remaining closed while services were slow to re-open with restrictions.

The Community Policing timeline was therefore disrupted eight months into the pilot project, only to resume fully by July 2020. The pilot project in Mellieħa was confirmed upon review and firmly established; in September 2020 the exercise was simultaneously extended to another 11 localities around the island. This meant that a total of 12 localities were operating according to the established Community Policing standard orders and did this for six months in total until March 2021, when a second lockdown was called for schools, childcare centres and non-essential services. And yet Community Policing not only continued to promote its aims and objectives, but it forged a tangible presence among the public and it continued to expand in spite of the COVID-19 pandemic obstacles.

This paper outlines each of the twelve Community Policing team experiences below. The research will be continuing beyond this initial stage in these localities as well as the projected introduction of more Community Policing teams. In fact, in the meantime, Government in May 2021 revealed plans that Community Policing was to be introduced in another nine new localities by the end of that same year and that it would be nationwide by the end of 2023 (Delia, 2021)⁵. Considering that there are 54 localities in Malta, to have 21 localities practicing CP means that close to 40% of the island would have seen the introduction of this model of policing over a period of two calendar years. Internally, the move from having one inspector to supervise all 12 teams to two inspectors who will manage the north and the south regions respectively was planned to reflect this expansion.

Methodology

The methodology used to conduct the 90-hour research into Community Policing in Malta during Covid-19 was designed to match the area of research. The methods applied

⁵ The new localities indicated are St Julian's, Vittoriosa, Senglea, Cospicua, Kalkara, Hamrun, Marsa, St Venera and Tarxien, that are found in Malta. Localities in the sister island of Gozo are not yet included in this next expansion.

and developed to this study helped to gain as much insight as possible about the subject (Kothari, 2014), as both researchers were in the pursuit of knowledge to obtain valid and reliable information from all the participants through their everyday lived experiences (Van Manen, 2016).

Data gathering employed was through interviews and observation through field and on the job shadowing. Observation involved much more than just being present and observing officers conduct their daily routine, it required being disciplined, knowledgeable, creative and hard working as much as the patrol officers are. Observing the officers' interaction with citizens enabled the practical understanding of the difficulties they experience everyday as how and what was said is a major source of qualitative data (Patton, 2002).

Initial contact with higher ranking police officers consisted of formal meetings to set up clear guidelines and parameters for research to occur, as well as interviews to be able to get a clear overview of the set-up of Community Policing in Malta. Interviews with the police officers were informal and conducted on the job whilst patrolling the respective areas for long hours at a stretch, sometimes spanning the whole duration of a 12-hour shift. The main advantage of interviewing in this manner was that non-verbal reactions could be observed during the course of the day, any issues or questions that arose could be tackled through follow up questioning, and clarification could be achieved if either party did not understand a question or response. It was important to be able to build a rapport during the hours of patrol as the quality of the interaction between the interviewer and respondent determines the calibre of the data collected (Bailey, 1994).

Research was also gained through the social networking media pages of the respective 12 localities where Community Policing was in force. These pages provide a virtual space where citizens of the localities can lodge complaints, seek help and acknowledge the work of the Community Policing teams, as well as offering a platform for the Policing teams to notify citizens of upcoming events within the community, traffic closure and information regarding the locality. Viewing the interaction between officers and citizens helped to gain an understanding as to the nature and dynamic of the relationship that evolved between the two.

Notes were jotted down immediately after every interview and observation, taking into consideration facial expressions and body language. These qualitative methods were employed to gain understanding, find out and learn about the social world of the Police Force during the pandemic and what their lived experiences are, the challenges they face and the recognition they receive through interacting with citizens on a daily basis. Community policing is much more than placing police officers on the beat, it is a guiding philosophy helping to facilitate police and community collaboration.

Interviews, together with foot patrols, were conducted between October and December 2020 and arrangements could be made once the first COVID lockdown was lifted⁶. The interviews conducted were unstructured and centred round the perception of the Community Policing team on traditional police culture vis-à-vis this new model of policing, the officers' own fear and safety in patrolling, and their training needs. These issues will be dealt with in future publications whereas this paper is dealing with the impact of COVID on Community Policing⁷.

The local impact of COVID-19

People often overlook the fact that community policing encompasses more than just foot patrols, bike patrols, and neighbourhood beats. These are only tools for the trade; for community policing to be successful, it has to become a mind-set of law enforcement that pervades the whole organisation. This idea is founded on the law enforcement agency's view of itself as a customer-service-oriented organisation. It is a top-down approach that is entrenched in the organisation. Community policing effectively focuses on more than simply the typical reactive parts of law, it also makes an effort to be proactive in dealing with problems and issues that arise within the communities they police. In Malta, the community policing model was based on that of the College of Policing UK⁸. During the pandemic, citizen compliance to the COVID-19 public health regulations was attended to by the traditional policing methods. In fact, community policing in Malta did not serve as an extension of law enforcement tactics to enforce such regulations, but rather worked hand in hand with healthcare to reinstate confidence in public order where and when needed. This was quite an exception to the general rule elsewhere in Europe (Fatsis & Lamb, 2022).

Mellieħa

Mellieħa is a touristic town with a population of 11,823 inhabitants (Regional Statistics Malta 2019 Edition) and a landscape that is urban, rural and coastal. Its spatial extent makes it one of the larger localities to patrol and the choice of this locality as the pilot project made sense in this regard. Demographically, its residents are both local Maltese-speakers, British ex-pats and since 2004, the number of EU residents have steadily increased. Irrespective of COVID-19, the main issue that CPOs faced was the language barrier of residents who did not speak or understand the English language.

⁶ Incidentally, the first COVID vaccine was administered just before Christmas of 2020 and members of the police were vaccinated in April and May 2021.

⁷ The authors wish to thank the following Community Policing personnel: Inspector Mark Cremona, Inspector Gaby Gatt, Sergeant Michael Zahra and Sergeant Daniel Garcia for providing the pamphlet designs and artwork, all Community Policing team leaders, all the CPOs and the Commissioner of Police.

⁸ Personal communication with Insp. Gatt.

Before the pandemic, this locality was the only one that did school appearances and teachings to the students, visited old people's homes within the locality to create awareness about security, as well as worked closely with the Local Council to bring about change in the locality through the physical dimension. But because of the first national lockdown that took place between 13th March and 2nd June 2020, schools were closed, and residents were asked to stay indoors to avoid infection spread. It seems that the typical issues in public order that would occur pre-pandemic were displaced indoors, as there was an increase in the number of domestic incidents, most notably involving non-locals. CPOs handling these issues were faced largely with linguistic and cultural barriers.

Swieqi and Pembroke

These two localities are home to approximately 18,000 inhabitants and are both within walking distance of the entertainment and nightlife district in Malta. The population cohort in these two localities consists of relatively young families. Pembroke is host to unique historic buildings dating back to the Knights of the Order of St John, two watch-towers guarding the coast, and British military buildings and training grounds that are still used by the local armed forces. Pembroke hosts a remarkable high concentration of state schools, private educational institutions, foreign university campuses, as well as schools teaching English as a foreign language, in total an amount of 13 educational institutions. The student population is quite high and averages out throughout the year with foreign students visiting in Easter and in the summer months for English language courses. This particular population has been a priority for CPOs due to its vulnerability being mostly under 18 years of age. Apart from that, the local residents are a mixture of Maltese, EU and third country nationals on the same scale as Mellieħa.

Swieqi has affluent up-market areas whose inhabitants, due to their socio-economic status within society, developed a sense of entitlement and this could be discerned through fieldwork observation as well in the way that such residents spoke to the police. CPOs stationed in this locality have experienced a high-level of expectation exerted by the residents in their response time to incidents. It has transpired, from observation, that there is a sense of urgency by the Maltese residents in particular who require such immediacy to avoid the escalation of incidents, as had been their previous experience when the neighbourhood was not as policed as it is currently. This is more of an anthropological observation that is quite unique to the area. Before the introduction of Community Policing, this neighbourhood was targeted in particular by a gang of East European thieves who would travel to Malta via catamaran from Sicily to carry out their criminal activities over the day and then immediately leave the island, as had transpired from police investigations and court arraignments. This spate of thefts had terrified the residents who would often report incidents of finding their houses marked by odd symbols, which later transpired were signs left by the gang marking the properties that had to be broken into. This organised crime activity tarred the local residents' trust in institutions that were

seen as slow to react, hence their sense of urgency and their entitlement to protection. Not only that, but being close to the entertainment area of Paceville and St Julian's, with the spill-over effect of the fear of crime due to such proximity with all the nuisance it would produce, increased the residents' expectations from Community Policing. Swieqi/Pembroke localities are known to attract teens and young adults during particular events such as Carnival and Halloween's trick and treating, that would result in drunken disturbances and breaches of public peace that were quite notoriously anticipated by all parties concerned. COVID-19 facilitated integration of officers into the community since residents were confined indoors and their fear of crime was quelled since the sources of disturbances were also kept at bay. CPOs took advantage of this time to get to know the citizens, build a relationship and good working rapport.

Valletta and Floriana

Valletta being the Capital City, a UNESCO World Heritage site and having a waterfront that caters for cruise liners, attracts millions of tourists every year. The upper part of this city is touristic and commercial with the main street running down the length of the capital lined with coffee shops, restaurants and retail outlets. Valletta also houses main Governmental Ministries and departments, that coupled with tourists visiting sites and museums generate heavy pedestrian traffic. Abounding with historical Baroque architecture, museums, monuments, palaces, bastions, forts, squares and churches, it is a cultural hub that has both its positive and negative aspects for policing: the negative side being that vandalism becomes a heritage crime and that tourists who break the law can easily depart not be caught in time and prosecuted. Whole campaigns about pickpocketing are an on-going issue as residents and tourists alike fall victim to this organised crime. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, mass cultural events such as Notte Bianca, concerts, cruise liner visitations and other cultural events could not be held, and so the CPOs could concentrate on the more mundane daily policing issues.

In direct contrast to the upper part of the City, the lower part is home to an ageing population and low-income/less than average educated residents living in two extreme conditions: affluent areas and low socio-economic areas with social issues ranging from drug abuse/trafficking, domestic violence, prostitution, intergenerational issues and homelessness. There are affluent non-Maltese residents living in Valletta, however they are few and spaced far between. In any case, not all of the population in the lower part of Valletta are locals, as in locally born and bred in Valletta, as the gentrification of the City meant that the younger generation has mostly moved out to other localities, depleting the attachment to the place.

COVID-19 exacerbated and highlighted some of the social issues experienced: domestic violence victims confined inside with their aggressors, drug trafficking and financial problems of the gambling addicts, plus squatting in empty dwellings due to homeless-

ness. CPOs were spared the usual pressures of policing tourist and cultural activities, from minor issues such as parking and watching out for pickpocketing. In this respect, they had the chance to focus much more on these residential issues. There was an issue with having a physical place from where they could operate since the district police station was already crowded, but this meant that CPOs spent a considerable amount of time patrolling on foot, by e-bike or by car.

The same can be said of Floriana, a town just outside the Valletta bastions, having a number of leading government ministries and departments located there: the Health Centre that had a catchment area covering quite a large area, a hospital specialising in oncology, as well as Caritas Malta's drug rehabilitation centre, Police Headquarters and the main Curia of the Archdiocese of Malta. This town has an ageing population and is dotted with dilapidated buildings offering opportunities for squatters to reside in. Community policing takes on a different nature here, with officers dealing with mundane issues arising from residential disputes and drug related concerns since users get their clean syringe supplies from the Health Centre and tend to be a nuisance around the town due to their erratic behaviour and crimes of opportunity, often causing fear of crime among the residents. At one point, a fugitive of a homicide that made it on national news found refuge in an abandoned basement near the Health Centre and had to be taken out after shots were fired by the police, which further increased the residents' fear of crime. COVID-19 helped curb drug users' activities and in easing the residents' cause of alarm. The refurbishment of the Floriana police hub was in progress during this research's fieldwork and in a sense, it helped the CPOs to be more present outdoors in the streets, which gave them a more visible profile as happened in Valletta.

Mdina, Rabat, Mtarfa and Dingli

These four localities in the northern region of the island are rich in history with places of interest ranging from the historical Capital City of Mdina, Christian catacombs of the first and second century AD, medieval palaces, the cathedral and churches, Roman villa ruins and museum, bastions, Baroque characteristics, the British clock tower and naval hospital and Dingli's scenic cliffs. These localities are geographically adjacent to each other and cover a large area of farmland and built environment making up a total area of 33.9 km².

Issues encountered by CPOs were two and related to the internal police culture. The first was a clash with the district police that came about as CPOs were viewed as doing 'soft policing' - a marketing or public relations exercise, as their approach towards community issues was proactive and did not deal necessarily with offenders. This was one of the localities where the clash between policing styles became evident from the introduction of Community Policing and the pandemic aided to make this distinction even more evident; still, it was not the only locality where this became evident during fieldwork.

The second police culture related issue emanated from the mistaken belief that CPOs were taking away valuable resources that were needed by the district police. It seemed that the main issue was the distinction created by the CPOs' different uniform, use of Segways and access to a mobile phone for work purposes which the district police did not have access to.

An issue that became evident during fieldwork was also cultural but it pertained to the local anthropological make-up of this locality: how local males patronized female community policing officers. Upon further investigation and interviewing, the officers pointed out that some local residents still view women in a traditional manner meaning that certain jobs considered as 'dangerous' should not be performed by women in society. Perhaps the issue was exacerbated during COVID-19 as most of those breaching the lockdown rules were middle-aged and older males who would venture out and meet without respecting the regulations, or even try and gather around outlets selling take-away food. However, there was an incident where a community-policing officer saved the life of a 2-year-old toddler who was choking inside her residence. Whilst on foot patrol the officer in question heard a commotion coming from inside a house, he knocked on the front door and through prompt first aid response saved the child from choking to death (Times of Malta, 2020). This incident made the headline news, garnered respect and had a very positive effect on the residents towards community policing officers and the concept of Community Policing.

Marsaxlokk and Birżebbuġia

Marsaxlokk is a traditional fishing village that attracts foreign tourists and locals for the restaurants specialising in fish cuisine with the seafront lined with around 50 restaurants, bars and coffee shops as well as shops and hawkers selling fresh fish. The Sunday market is a main tourist attraction, as is swimming in the summer months. This resident population itself is inclined towards an older generation made up of the original fishermen and their families who would have sustained with the fishing industry. On the other hand, the neighbouring town of Birżebbuġia is popular for its sandy beach, archaeological sites, and the Malta Freeport Terminal, which is one of the busiest trans-shipment hub ports in Europe.

In these localities CPOs encounter diverse issues stemming from the same type of clash between police cultures as was encountered in Rabat and Mdina. In this case, it seemed that the zero tolerance policing of the CPOs contrasted with the district police with regards to parking issues, littering and encroachment of restaurant tables beyond the permitted limits. CPOs were initially viewed as an obstacle and an impediment until a balance was found. For example, issues with fishermen blocking walkways to pedestrians because of boat and net maintenance as well as the problem of derelict fishing vessels, were tackled over time, and in some cases through the mediation of the local council. Some locals were truly apprehensive of this style of policing at its inception, deeming it suspicious and imposing, but due to continued support from the Local Council, CP

eventually thrived and consolidated itself. Covid-19 helped in forging this with the residents, however the coastal promenade area where the offending took place was still proving difficult to police due to the intensive landuse. In fact, at one point, an altercation between a CPO and a fisherman occurred over a misinterpretation of regulations and ended up in court. As in Valletta, the Marsaxlokk CPOs were operating from premises within the precinct of the primary school that was lent to them temporarily as they did not have their own space at the time. The policing hub on the waterfront was still under construction at the time the fieldwork was conducted.

Fgura

Fgura, once a rural farming village, experienced rapid development after World War II due to the taking up of residences by British officers working at the Malta Dockyards, which also provided employment to many locals, making this town relatively modern. The main street, which crosses the length of the town, is the primary commercial area. Since property is cheaper in this part of Malta, many non-Maltese residents settle here, especially third country nationals. This has been indicated by locals and CPOs alike as causing ethnic clashes, whether verbal, physical or giving rise to segregation of activities to certain areas as was happening in the neighbouring locality of Paola largely due to the increasing Muslim population. Issues encountered by the Community Policing team were mainly due to cultural misunderstandings and fear of crime credited to different communities sharing the same zones.

Another major issue is due to the fact that this locality is densely populated, creating a shortage of parking spaces and ensuing clashes between neighbours. This locality is also home to the Home Affairs Minister under whose patronage the Police Force lies, an issue which created performance anxiety on the CPOs. Incidentally, Fgura is also home to the headquarters of the Law Enforcement Agency (LESA) that enforces traffic and littering bye-laws, and whose officers are called Community Officers (COs). There is no particular confusion between the two enforcement roles, after all the residents can easily distinguish the two from their uniforms, logos, and knowledge of the service given. This means that the local population was already used to being patrolled by LESA officers, in fact, the introduction of Community Policing in this locality had the most smooth transition of all according to the fieldwork observation. But Community Policing helped with allaying public fear of crime since the local police station could not be manned daily and COVID-19 further emphasised the police presence, giving the CPOs high visibility.

Other observations

The impact of COVID-19 has tried and tested the Community Policing structure as well as the internal organisational support in continuing with the project and establishing the

foothold on a more permanent basis. During this trying time, this goodwill was crucial to the success of Community Policing. In fact, in April 2021, the public trust survey showed an increase in 4%, which translated as 18,000 more positive responses⁹. The survey responses were collected and analysed between March and April 2021, which means 6 to 7 months after the introduction of Community Policing in the new localities.

Internally, the community policing effort continued not only in terms of the day-to-day running but involved more future planning in expanding the exercise geographically and in plans for engaging and recruiting more staff. Training was provided even during COVID-19 in topics such as community building, proactive problem solving and positive/innovative measures of policing.

It seems that the failures of neighbourhood watches and tourism policing were studied by the internal police administration although the central core needs to focus more on tangible crime prevention measures that empower the public. The second way forward, according to this research, is to work on the internal clashing cultures between the traditional district policing and community policing. Just like justice, community policing 'must be seen to be done' and the central administration must reinforce this new emerging police culture while reducing friction with the traditional command and control at the district level. Since community policing is not a one type fits all style of policing, each Maltese locality deals with issues encountered differently and directly according to need always keeping in mind to build community trust and ensure public safety (Bayerl et al., 2017).

Conclusion

Despite being implemented during a pandemic, with issues affecting community and policing globally, the Community Policing initiative proved overall successful in bringing the two essential principles of community policing together – community building and proactive problem solving. These fundamentals transcend reassurance through visible and effective police patrolling in the respective localities in partnership with Local Councils to effectively enforce, assist, educate, respond rapidly to circumstances, target hot spot areas, prevent violence and other criminal activity. Not only that, but in spite of COVID-19, community policing in Malta was buffered from the new policing commitments. It was not involved in any of the inspections or extra policing duties brought about due to the pandemic, which was crucial in allowing the new system to develop and form its own solid foundation. In fact, COVID could have thwarted the community policing efforts and misguided the public by diluting the true intent behind the project, but buffering Com-

⁹ See Eurobarometer (2021) and also a related social media posting of Malta's police <https://www.facebook.com/themaltapoliceforce/photos/a.489182811165282/4108049729278554/?type=3> (last accessed 5th May 2021).

munity Policing ensured its development and integration into the existing structure. No other studies could be found to substantiate this research where community policing was introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic. This makes Malta all the more unique in its approach to introducing this type of policing concept successfully in the face of hardship.

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