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Restorative Community Policing in the UK: Dorset, Cheshire and Norfolk Constables Point the Way

BY JOSHUA WACHTEL

Police in roughly 50 percent of counties in England and Wales employ some form of restorative justice (RJ). Constables in districts including Dorset (southwest), Cheshire and Lancashire (northwest), Hull (northeast) and Norfolk (east) are actively making restorative practices (RP) their first line of defense — at officers' discretion — for dealing with neighborhood disputes, first-time and low-level youth offenders, youth crime in schools, and some adult cases.

The movement toward RP is partly a reaction to national policy targets emphasizing "sanction detection," which increased the number of crimes prosecuted. As a consequence, prisons became overcrowded and the number of youth brought into the criminal justice system for the first time nearly doubled, many for crimes that formerly would have been dealt with by schools, parents, the community or the neighborhood "bobby." Also, said Garry Shewan, assistant chief constable of Cheshire Police, "Officers have concentrated on the 'low-hanging fruit' of detections achieved with the least effort, ensuring that few persistent criminals were amongst the increases in detected crimes. Performance management has brought many more offenders to justice, only they are the wrong offenders" (Shewan, 2009).

However, a recent policy change by the Home Office, the national government department that oversees policing, has established criteria for reviewing police performance based on public confidence and trust rather than on performance targets and sanction detection. Constabularies that had previously piloted restor-

ative justice programs without a national legal mandate to do so believe this change in performance assessment authorizes them to use RJ in more cases.

Yvonne Surman, manager of the Safe Schools and Communities Team, a partnership of the Dorset Police and the Dorset Youth Offending Team, said that the Home Office National Crime Recording Standard established in 2002 resulted in "a huge increase in young people receiving a criminal record. When a child had a fallout with a friend on the playground, it used to be dealt with in school. Then police had to record it as a crime and give it a number. We had a 171 percent increase in reprimands and a 400 percent increase in final warnings, all for low-level things. It's three strikes, you're out. First a reprimand, then a final warning, then you go to court."

The Dorset Police are employing RJ to help reduce the number of youth entering the justice system. They are also satisfying victims of crime in the process. Said Surman, "This is not police driven. It is a very victim-focused process. We want to see that the victims are satisfied about how a crime is dealt with."

Restorative reprimands for first-time youth offenders are offered for low-level crimes like minor criminal damage or theft, where there is no injury and less than £200 of damage. The officer asks the offender and then the victim if they want to participate in a restorative conference, which may also be attended by family and friends of the victim and offender and other affected parties. In the first six months of the pilot, which began in April 2008, victim satisfaction rates

approached 98 percent, and the number of youth entering the justice system was reduced by 44 percent. (Go to: www.dorset.police.uk/default.aspx?page=2516 for a short article and video of an actual restorative reprimand with a boy who threw a rock, breaking a train windshield.)

For some very minor offenses, a new national program called the Youth Restorative Disposal (YRD) gives officers the discretion to deal with a case right then and there, on the street. Trained officers may also use RP to handle neighborhood disputes. In one case, where for years the police had tried everything but had continually failed to quell an endless stream of complaints between two neighboring households, a restorative conference was finally held with the families. The police couldn't believe it when the previously contentious neighbors went home to have a barbecue together. Dorset Police are also training schools to use RP for discipline and in day-to-day teacher-student interactions.

Kim Smith, restorative justice development manager for Norfolk Police, has been working to train and promote the use of RJ in Norfolk for two years. Said Smith, "RJ is being developed on a variety of fronts, and it's growing exponentially in terms of the interest being generated." Smith started out training a small cohort of local officers about conferencing. Now about 20 percent of the frontline policing staff has been trained by Smith and IIRP UK (www.iirp.org/uk). Officers receive a three-day training on how to facilitate restorative conferences or a one-day awareness training on how to use restorative questions like, "What

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happened?" "Who was affected?" and "What can be done to repair the harm?" to help resolve disputes immediately on the street. Said Smith, "Many of the cases are problems we couldn't deal with using a conventional policing perspective. Here it's dealt with in two hours."

Smith, who previously worked in London and facilitated restorative conferences in the pilot research programs run by Lawrence Sherman, Wolfson Professor of Criminology at Cambridge University (see eForum article, "Restorative Justice: The Evidence" at www.realjustice.org/library/rjevidence.html), said he finds that in Norfolk County, where there is more of a community spirit than in urban areas, "You're rebuilding some of those community links again." He gave the example of a case involving a group of youngsters who were planning to go to a school dance. When the event was canceled some youth "got drunk and went on a mini-rampage around town. Police ran a conference to address some of the harm, and the kids were happy for a chance to accept responsibility for their actions."

In Cheshire, approximately 1,000 staff, or 85 percent of frontline police, have received "Level One" training by Restorative Solutions, directed by Sir Charles Pollard, former chief constable of Thames Valley Police. Like the IIRP training, this one-day training gives officers an ability "to run a conversation or meeting between people in conflict over 'low-level' or minor issues" (www.restorativesolutions.org.uk). "Level Two" training offers two more days and prepares facilitators to run face-to-face meetings.

According to assistant chief constable Garry Shewan, Cheshire Police are currently handling 100 to 150 crimes per month with restorative methods. The majority are youth crimes, but some are adult. The process is restricted neither to an age group nor to first-time offenders.

Each officer makes a decision based on offender risk factors and victim concerns. So far, the police department has found that 97 percent of its RJ disposals have been "appropriate and correctly delivered." Said Shewan, "Give the officers trust, and they are delivering high quality RJ interventions."

Shewan added that RJ has often been used for "lower-level incidents, with no long-term community impact." Now they are looking to apply RJ for more serious offenses, in cases with more long-term community impact. The cases are being closely monitored, and reports on the impact are expected later in 2009. Shewan is particularly interested in demonstrating the impact of the programs on victim satisfaction and public confidence in the police force and believes that the results will be favorable.

Early indications show very high rates of victim satisfaction with the process, along with a reduction in reoffending rates. An August 2008 report states: "The predicted rate of recidivism for those juveniles within Cheshire who participated in a restorative approach was 13%, against the national rate of reoffending of 23.2% and a local rate within Cheshire of 31% for those who were issued a reprimand instead of the restorative approach. The rate of recidivism for adult offenders committing their first offence and being dealt with through RJ is 0% as opposed to the more traditional approach, where the rate is 13%" (Taylor, 2008).

Shewan is the ACPO (Association of Chief Police Officers for England and Wales) lead on community and restorative justice and chair of the RAiN (Restorative Approaches in Neighborhoods) program, which provides a system for police to employ RP on the street. In this capacity, Shewan plays a key role in bringing together RP police advocates and advancing RP throughout the UK. He plans to move to the Manchester police force later in

2009 and hopes then to bring restorative policing to a major city.

Les Davey, former police officer and RJ pioneer with Thames Valley Police, the first UK police to adopt RJ, is now CEO of IIRP UK, which has trained police in Dorset, Norfolk and Hull. Davey argues that the effectiveness of RJ has been proven. In a recent editorial he quoted one advocate, "Restorative justice in the UK is fast becoming the most over-evaluated and under-practiced area of criminal justice" (Hoyle, 2008), and another, "We can no longer afford for Restorative Justice to be the most researched, most effective tool the Criminal Justice System does not use" (Restorative Justice Consortium, 2008). (See also eForum article, "Restorative Justice Reduces Crime and Saves Money" at: www.realjustice.org/library/ukresearch.html.) Davey would like to see RJ used more with adults and with the burgeoning prison population. He noted that police in Hull, Norfolk and Dorset are furthering the use of RP in schools and other areas.

"We're at the brink of an opportunity to take this further into policing," said Davey. "RJ is value for money, the evidence for it is beyond proven, and there are practical examples throughout the country. RP can meet the new objectives and outcomes police have for the communities they serve." ☉

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