



Counter-terrorism policing and culturally and linguistically diverse communities 1: the challenges

In the aftermath of highly publicised terrorist attacks, since 2001 terrorism has emerged as a key concern for police and the community, according to a three-year Victorian study on counter-terrorism policing and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities (Pickering et al. 2007). People from CALD or distinct religious backgrounds are often the focus of counter-terrorism strategies. The study showed that the attention paid to CALD communities can make them feel vulnerable to increased police attention. Concerns raised particularly by Muslim CALD participants included an increased perceived sense of surveillance, an apparent equating of Islam with terrorism, isolated racist incidents by police affecting young males more often than previously, and the perceived demonising of Muslims and non-Europeans by mass media coverage of terrorism. Cultural and religious sensitivities can also affect the sharing of information with police.

The study identified challenges of policing in CALD communities, particularly in relation to counter-terrorism. Engaging CALD communities through community policing is seen as vital by police, and all but a few recognised the importance of multiculturalism for society. Despite this belief, more than 60 percent of Victorian police came into contact with CALD communities less than once a month, and the majority (63%) rarely spent time trying to develop relations with these communities. Police identified the following most significant barriers in policing CALD communities (where they agreed or strongly agreed): language barriers (81%); lack of community trust (62%); cultural and religious understanding (56%); limited time (52%); and lack of respect for female officers in some CALD communities (44%).

'Language barriers' was the most important issue identified by police in this study. Similarly, research in the United States found that language often poses a barrier to effective policing (Shah, Rhaman & Khashu 2007). Overall, 3.1 million Australians speak a language other than English in the home (ABS 2008) and effective communication skills is an essential part of community policing in multicultural neighbourhoods. Most Australian state and territory police agencies have dedicated multicultural advisory units that provide services to members of CALD communities. Many also have specific multicultural liaison officers. However, the report on the Victorian study stresses that an understanding of CALD communities should not be restricted to specialist units or officers.

References

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