



Workshop
Public Safety in a Diverse Society

Preparatory meeting for the International Conference

May 24th of 2011

University of Groningen, Netherlands

On May 24th, the workshop on public safety in a diverse work context was held in Groningen, The Netherlands, organized by the Institute of Integration and Social Efficacy (ISW, University of Groningen) and the Public Safety Community Program (IE University and col., Spain). Attendants were social scientists and a practitioner working in the field of public safety. In the workshop current challenges and trends on public safety addressing our diverse societies in our changing and global world were analysed. In addition, through group discussion the importance of inclusive, deliberative, and integrative approaches when defining public safety to face these challenges, was discussed.

First, Dr. Miguel Gandarillas presented the current state of public safety in relation to diversity, resulting in an overview of challenges of a diverse and changing society.

Second, small subgroups discussed and presented their view of defining principles of public safety and guidelines of work and interventions, based on four main questions. The most important results of these discussions are reported here.

What are the defining principles of a public safety which respond to present and future diverse and complex societies?

First, pro-active policing or in other words, preventing negative incidents regarding public safety from taking place in the first place, seems an important principle to tackle the problems of a more complex society. This method of dealing with safety issues centers more on social causes of problems and involves everyone in a problem of everyone.

Second, understanding and dealing with issues of objective (e.g. crime rates) vs. subjective (e.g. feelings of safety among civilians) is important. For example, in the Netherlands crime rates have dropped in recent years, whereas subjective perceptions of safety have decreased. So increasing public safety is not only a question of displaying it with 'hard' numbers and statistics, but also requires reassuring safety for civilians on a psychological level.

Third, a complex society requires a tight cooperation between the different actors involved in public safety matters. Public safety is not only a responsibility for the police but requires cooperation with local public and private organizations, as well as with civilians.

What should be the main types of public safety services and agents, purposes and working methods?

An integrated view on public safety requires that many different actors play important roles trying to increase public safety in a city or district. In line with the aforementioned third guiding principle this requires a communication structure between the municipality (mayor), police, ministry of justice, housing cooperations, schools, neighbourhood organizations, social workers and other professionals in the field of social matters, to cover all aspects of public safety.

With regard to working methods, intensive cooperation and tight networks are of central importance to make such structure to function properly. This requires decentralised

communication structures between actors and non-hierarchical means/styles of leadership to coordinate such a structure.

In terms of dealing with specific issues of public safety, contact with focus groups seems to be essential. In this regard, both a group tailored approach (intervening on specific target groups in the neighbourhood) or a problem tailored approach (intervening in specific (local) problems regarding safety by using different area's of expertise among professionals) are applicable and already adopted in the Dutch context.

What would be the roles and functions of other non police bodies, agencies, entities, services and departments in public safety and the type of cooperation between them?

On the one hand, structural aspects are important: for example the diversity oriented neighborhood planning by housing cooperation. Furthermore, a strong focus on integrating different expertise in one area seems vital; for example, setting up problem based expert groups in which people with different expertise cooperate to address specific problems (see also previous question).

On the other hand, process aspects are important. Letting cooperation structures function properly requires open informational exchange and closeness among actors. In addition it requires leadership that stimulates this openness and collaboration (collaborative leadership). Open informational exchange and closeness is not only important among professionals dealing with safety matters but also towards civilians in the neighborhoods. Keeping bi-directional communication lines with civilians tight and give local authorities a stronger sense of what is happening in the neighborhood or district and gives civilians the feeling that authorities listen to their concerns.

What would be the roles and activities of civil society and public participation?

In line with the idea of open informational exchange and closeness, responsible authorities on public safety matters should keep strong communication ties with civilians in the neighborhoods. In this way, civilians have an important role in signaling incidents regarding safety in their local neighborhood. In addition, civilians must be empowered to also take own responsibility in not only reporting but also solving safety matters. For example, deploying role models from the

neighborhood can act as an important prevention strategy for local youth to keep falling into deviant behavior. In the end, the inclusion of civilians in the structure makes them aware of their own responsibility in dealing with and solving (local) safety matters.

