



An evolution of Social Capital through Community Engagement



Introduction: Building Social Capital

In 2015 Susan Ritchie, Director of MutualGain and Andrew Fisher, Lead Associate for Community Safety, wrote a paper called *A Functional Shift: Building a New Model of Engagement*.¹ In the paper, published in *Policing* journal, Fisher and Ritchie shared their thoughts in relation to the rationale for the police to use strengths based methods to engage communities. The focus was on empowering communities, supporting them to start to take responsibility for addressing problems either by themselves or in partnership with the police and their partners.

We proposed that by developing social capital you can develop active citizenship and this would have a positive effect on the health, well-being and safety of communities.

One of the first clients to test our hypothesis was Durham Constabulary. We worked with two cohorts, from very different communities and used methods such as focus groups, Appreciative Inquiry and Participatory Budgeting to hear from those communities. The programme was independently evaluated by Durham University and a paper, highlighting the findings of the programme has just been published in the *International Journal of Police Science & Management*.²

Contributing to the Evidence Base

1.0 This may be useful for individuals who need to make a business case for this approach.

1.1 Investing in engaging communities has always been a central role for policing in the UK and globally. The authors point out that 'The European Commission (Europa, 2017) recognises the importance and international significance of investing in community engagement to improve citizens' perceptions of public authorities.' ([page 3, para 2](#))

1.2 The positive impact of engaging communities is highlighted through empirical research, predominantly from the USA (Pate et al., 1986; Skogan and Steiner, 2004). This has shown that community engagement activities can have positive impacts on crime reduction and improve citizens' attitudes towards the police. ([page 3, para 2](#))

1.3 Yet, as we point out in our 2015 paper, there is a lack of knowledge of rationale, techniques and purposes for engaging communities. The Durham paper acknowledges Lloyd and Foster's (2009) assertion that community engagement in the UK remains poorly understood and frequently held in low regard as it is not considered as 'real' police work. Further, they note that community engagement is often poorly implemented. A reason for this may be the lack of evidence around 'what works' relating to community engagement in the UK (Myhill, 2012). ([page 3, para 3](#))

This is something that we at MutualGain are trying to change through blogs³ and further publications. The College of Policing are also addressing this through their online knowledge hub.

1.4 The value of engaging communities is also recognised by the Durham authors when they state 'Our findings support the observations of Cosgrove and Ramshaw (2014) and HMIC (2017b) that community engagement should not be scorned as the poor relation of enforcement-oriented activities.' ([Page 10, para 3](#))

1.5 Research into the efficacy of training (in relation to community engagement) shows that effects typically trail off over time (Goldstein, 1980), and evidence indicates that community engagement activity requires consistent effort from both the police and the public (Myhill, 2012). It is therefore important that you don't view this as a 'project' and instead view this approach as a new way of working with communities and a new way of policing with them. ([Page 10, para 3](#))

1. Fisher, A.C. and Ritchie, S. (2015) *A Functional Shift: Building a New Model of Engagement Policing*, Volume 9, Number 1, pp. 101-114

2. Lockey, S. et al, (2019), The impact of a local community engagement intervention on residents' fear of crime and perceptions of the police. *International Journal of Police Science & Management* 1-13

3. See <https://www.mutualgain.org/blog/>

Theoretical support for building capital

2.0 There is a great deal of support for our theory about the positive impact of building social capital. The authors of the Durham paper state that 'consistent with Coleman's (1988) conceptualization of social capital, we expect that if citizens believe there is a high degree of social capital within their community, they are less likely to be fearful of crime and more likely to hold positive perceptions of the police based on the co-production of community norms and values.' (page 2, para 3)

2.1 Social capital is broken down into three dimensions:

- Structural - the structural component of social capital refers to connections among actors, specifically, the extent to which they share information.
- Relational - The relational aspect refers to the personal relationships people in a network have developed with each other over time (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998).
- Cognitive - the cognitive dimension of social capital relates to the development of a shared vision. That is, as people interact with each other as part of a network, they can develop a common set of goals, which in turn promotes a sense of shared responsibility and collective action (Coleman, 1988). (Page 3, para 3)

2.2 The cognitive dimension of social capital both reinforces and is reinforced by the structural and relational components; people with shared values and goals are likely to have strong relationships and are thus more likely to trust each other, interact regularly and exchange information

2.3 The importance of this is highlighted using research in relation to areas potency.⁴ Here, the authors highlight empirical work from the USA (Gibson et al., 2002) and the UK (Jackson and Bradford, 2009) that suggests that belief of the extent to which citizens are willing and able to act for the benefit of their community is an important factor for reduction of fear of crime.

4. Potency = voice, cooperation with police, life satisfaction and fear of crime



So what works?

3.0 Analysis of the data collected by the authors of the Durham paper, indicated that the intervention was successful in meeting its objectives in the area it was trialled. There were significant increases in:

- Social capital
- Local area potency
- Confidence in the police
- Perceptions of police community focus
- Decreases in fear of crime and ASB (Page 1, 1st para)

3.1 In relation to the impact on community attitude to crime and the police, the authors posit 'These findings contribute to the limited empirical evidence in support of the positive influence of community engagement in the United Kingdom, and indicate that social capital and local area potency are important antecedents of citizens' positive attitudes toward crime and the police.'

(Page 1, 1st para)

3.2 In terms of the analysis of the data, the authors comment that both social capital and local area potency increased significantly in the intervention area.

- Confidence in the police increased significantly in both the intervention areas.
- Perceptions of police community focus saw a significant increase in the intervention area.
- There was a reduction of fear of crime in the intervention area.
- In the intervention area, ASB reduced by 44.7% from a monthly average of 6.27 incidents per 1000 to 3.47, for the 6 months prior to the intervention compared with the six months post intervention.

(Page 8, para 3)



Conclusion

4.0 The information contained within the journal article clearly articulates the positive outcomes that can be achieved when engaging communities in order to build social capital. The strength of the paper comes not only from the commitment and enthusiasm from those engaged in the training programme, but also the robust methods used to test our beliefs.

4.1 One of the key principles of MutualGain is our commitment to 'share the learning' that comes from our programmes. We have done this by writing blogs, journal articles and book chapters, and we encourage our clients to connect with organisations that are willing to undertake a robust evaluation of our methods.

For more information on any of the above please get in touch at the address below:



Email : info@mutualgain.org
Telephone : 020 3887 2859
Website : www.mutualgain.org