



Criminal Justice Commission

**An Evaluation of the
Woorabinda Crime Prevention Partnership**

September 1998

Research and Prevention Division

Introduction

Two members of the Research and Prevention Division (the ATSI Liaison Officer and a Research Officer) visited Woorabinda and attended the Woorabinda CPP meeting held on Monday 7 September. Thirteen people attended the meeting.

After the meeting was held, interviews were conducted with eight of the people who attended the meeting. Of these eight people, three were police officers (none of whom had attended a Partnership meeting before), two were religious sisters, two were community health workers, one was the CPP coordinator, and one was a resident of Woorabinda. Of the non-police members, all but one had attended meetings on a regular basis.

Background to the Woorabinda CPP

The Woorabinda CPP was established some months after the seven other pilot Partnerships had commenced. The first Woorabinda CPP meeting was held in May 1998, and therefore the group has only met five times. The Partnership was established after the Woorabinda Council had approached the Community Development Coordinator to participate in the pilot program. It was launched in conjunction with the Eddie Gilbert Cricket Program (although this program has since lapsed in Woorabinda).

The Woorabinda Partnership has a coordinator who is employed for between two and four hours per week, and it is officially chaired by the Chairman of the Woorabinda Aboriginal Council.

Crime problems in Woorabinda

The most commonly cited crime problems in Woorabinda were: domestic violence, vandalism, drug and alcohol consumption and inadequately supervised juveniles.

There was some divergence between the police and non-police members of the Partnership about the main crime problems. While police tended to identify offences against the person (such as assault, sexual assault and homicide) as the main crime problems, community members tended to see drug issues, vandalism and juvenile supervision as central crime problems. Domestic violence was a problem commonly identified by both police and non-police. Indeed, police members commented that "almost everyone in town has a domestic violence order - either as the subject of one or as the victim".

This difference of opinion is not surprising, and is really a logical consequence of the perspectives of different groups in the community. Police naturally characterise community problems in terms of criminal offences, whereas community members tend to identify underlying social problems (such as alcohol and drug consumption and inadequate supervision of children at night).

Other crime problems identified by interviewees included:

- violence on the streets (community member)
- problems getting the law properly administered (community member)

- child neglect and abuse (community member)
- juvenile break and enter offences (police member)
- outstanding warrants (police member)
- street offences (police member).

Aims of the Woorabinda CPP

Many different aims for the Partnership were identified by interviewees. Police members spoke about three main aims of the Partnership:

- to stabilise the community
- to stop violence in the streets
- to get juveniles off the streets.

Community members spoke about the following aims:

- to provide a link with the “outside world”
- to address a breakdown in communication between the community and police, and to develop a partnership between the two
- to have “a clean place”
- to make people aware of issues
- to address the by-laws
- to improve liaison between state and community police.

Issues identified for action by the Woorabinda CPP

Members of the Partnership felt that it was still too early in the life of the group for it to have generated any concrete initiatives or outcomes (“We haven’t really actioned anything”, “It’s a lot of talk so far”). Interviewees commented, however, on several key issues identified by the group that, if the Partnership were to continue, would provide real change in Woorabinda.

1. Forming a better police/community relationship

The relationship between police and the community in Woorabinda is poor. One police officer interviewed commented that “there is no relationship between police and the community”. It was a matter of some significance that members of the community and police officers were attending meetings

together at all. Evidence of conflict between the two groups could be found in several comments by interviewees, who were often keen to 'blame' the other for a lack of action on crime issues in Woorabinda. While police perceive a certain level of 'apathy' in the community, community members feel that "putting it back on the community is the biggest cop-out". It appears that police involvement in the community is minimal, although an Adopt-a-Cop program has recently started in the local primary school for the first time.

Comments about the nature of the relationship were made by several interviewees:

"There needs to be a diffusion of the hate in the community towards police.... We need a blue uniform to come and talk to the old people up the street. There's no proactive policing - it's all reactive" (community member).

"There's always been strong problems between police and the community. Historically it's a miracle, really (that police and community members come together to talk at one table)" (community member).

"XX and XX are working real good - they'll come and meet with us, but we get some real arse holes here" (community member).

"I don't want to go there and be abused when I go to some of those meetings" (police member).

"The only time the police and the community get together is when police attend to a job" (police member).

"They (the police) just listen to what we've got to say about it. Nothing's been done about it. But there is the 1800 number I s'pose. I don't think there's anybody that's used it though" (community member).

The Partnership has been discussing the possibility of having a Police Liaison Officer spend some time in the community to make recommendations about how to address the relationship. One community member in particular explained his feeling that police had misunderstood the concept of a partnership. He noted that police participants simply wanted to present the group with a list of options available, whereas the real idea of the Partnership is to sit together and come to an agreement. He spoke about the need for some kind of formal 'accord' or contract, signed by police and community members, which outlines the commitments that each side of the table will make. He felt this would provide some kind of accountability for promises made by police.

2. Reviewing and updating the by-laws

A central issue raised in the CPP meeting, and by most interviewees individually, was the nature of the by-laws in Woorabinda that are enforced by community police. The by-laws are, by all accounts, out of date and inappropriate. The meeting has resolved that the Officer in Charge of the police station, with the help of two of the community members of the CPP, will identify the by-laws that are still useful to the community and delete the remainder. This document will form the basis of a move to have the by-laws amended, a process which will require both Council and parliamentary endorsement.

Most attendees at the meeting felt that this should be the top priority for both the CPP and the Council, and there was hope that this would be an important outcome for the community:

"The by-laws are stopping us. We've identified all our problems - but the by-laws are stopping us from doing stuff.... that's what's holding us back" (community member).

"The by-laws initiative from this morning's meeting is a very good initiative" (community member).

However, there was one interviewee who was slightly cautious about the ability of the by-laws to resolve law enforcement issues: "More by-laws create more expectation on police to enforce them" (community member).

3. The relationship between community police and state police

This issue was raised during the CPP meeting, where it was commented that community police were seen "as a joke" by the local community, "perceived by the locals as the local taxi service", and also as "the meat in the sandwich". The meeting discussed the need for an education campaign to address the public perception of community police.

A central problem with the position of community police is that, while they are funded by the Department of Families Youth and Community Care (funding which is administered by the Council), they come under the control of the QPS, who have a central role in hiring and firing. There was agreement that community police need a career structure and training from the QPS, with scope for employment outside the community ("in the mainstream").

One of the community members explained that community police are "sent in to do the dirty work", while the state police "sit and watch from the police station". In fact, a police officer interviewed after the meeting described an incident where community police had attended a fight in the street and had started getting pushed around. According to the officer: "They took off their shirts, they left their cars there, and they went home. They'd had enough." The perception of some community members is that community police are given little recognition or support by the state police in Woorabinda. The need for training for community police was raised. For example, one interviewee commented later that: "I don't think they (community police) know the laws themselves" (community member). Police have stated that: "There is a training program, but nobody turns up". One of the problems with community police, as identified by state police, is that: "Community police are hired largely by word of mouth", and that they often commit criminal offences which preclude them from doing police work. Other comments about community police which were made by police interviewees were:

"The community police are between a rock and a hard place" (police member).

"There's a very high turnover rate of community police" (police member).

Problems with the Woorabinda CPP

1. Representation

Almost every person interviewed complained that the Council had not been active enough in the work of the Partnership. Several snide comments were made in the meeting itself about the absence of a Council representative at the meeting. It was also noted by some interviewees that the Education Department had not been involved in the Partnership. Comments made by individuals about representation include:

"The Council needs to be more involved because they have the power to get things off the ground" (community member)

"They (people for the Partnership) were identified but they rarely turned up. Sometimes police didn't turn up, sometimes Council weren't there... the community is very cynical" (community member)

"The Council should be responsible for it - they were the ones that advertised (for people to come onto the CPP)" (community member)

"The Council come to the big meetings where a big crowd turn up, but when it comes to the smaller meetings - they're not there..... They tried to get some young people involved. They got someone, (but then) they couldn't turn up - they need someone to have input from the youth" (community member)

"Representatives from the Council need to be there. Representatives from health and education need to be there. Everything's dropped back on the police" (police member)

"They need someone there from the Education Department" (police member)

The future success of a CPP in Woorabinda would clearly rely on the continued involvement of the Council, and would also benefit from attendance by the Education Department.

2. Attendance

Several interviewees commented that it was difficult to get people to attend meetings regularly and on time:

"I need Partnerships developed where people come with an intention to participate" (community member)

"People don't turn up on time" (community member)

3. Lack of action

There was some frustration expressed about the lack of any concrete outcomes of the Partnership:

"The same issues keep coming up but there's been no action" (community member), although the same interviewee commented later: "This is the first time that we feel that something's going to come out of it. We've had meetings before - oodles - about the same sorts of issues - but it hasn't been formal".

"I see a glimmer of hope with some of the people there but they've got a lot of work to do" (police member)

"Too much talk no action - identifying problems was good but nothing came out of it. They wanted the police to do everything" (police member)

"If we don't have anyone to drive it, the community won't do it, the police won't build the bridges..." (community member)

It must be acknowledged, however, that the Partnership has been operating for a very short time (see comments about the success of the CPP below).

4. The employment of the coordinator

There was comment from two members that the coordinator was only employed for between two and four hours a week, which they felt was inadequate for the task involved (particularly as the coordinator was also employed elsewhere):

"There is a need for a fully funded role for crime prevention.... A person with administrative and legal skills to coordinate everything and keep it going" (community member)

"Four hours is not enough time for me" (community member)

Has the Woorabinda CPP been successful?

All but one interviewee felt it was too early to say whether or not the Partnership had been successful. Were the group to continue, however, interviewees felt that successful outcomes would follow:

"It's been successful in the foundation stages. We need to action things. If we were to continue with it now, we'd start to see the benefits of it" (community member)

"It's too early to say. Long-term we will be successful, but there's a lot of work to do" (police member)

"Not to date. It needs somebody to pick up the ball and run with it. It seems to be the women that are involved - they are the movers and shakers" (police member)

"It's got great potential, but it needs someone to drive it. The coordinator needs a lot of support and to have access to the right people.... We really need help from outside until the community can acknowledge themselves that it's a really good thing - to see the benefits and the results" (community member)

Conclusion

There are clearly some challenges facing the Woorabinda CPP. The problems identified by interviewees were:

- the attendance and commitment of Partnership members to the meetings
- the need to see concrete results and outcomes
- ensuring the key agencies and groups are represented on the committee.

Woorabinda is familiar with sporadic outside involvement. The community members of the CPP want to ensure that support to the Partnership is continued, several commenting that the initiative will almost certainly fail without it. In the absence of a productive relationship between police and the community, and in the absence of almost all community policing programs in place in other communities, it would seem that the CPP is an important initiative for Woorabinda.