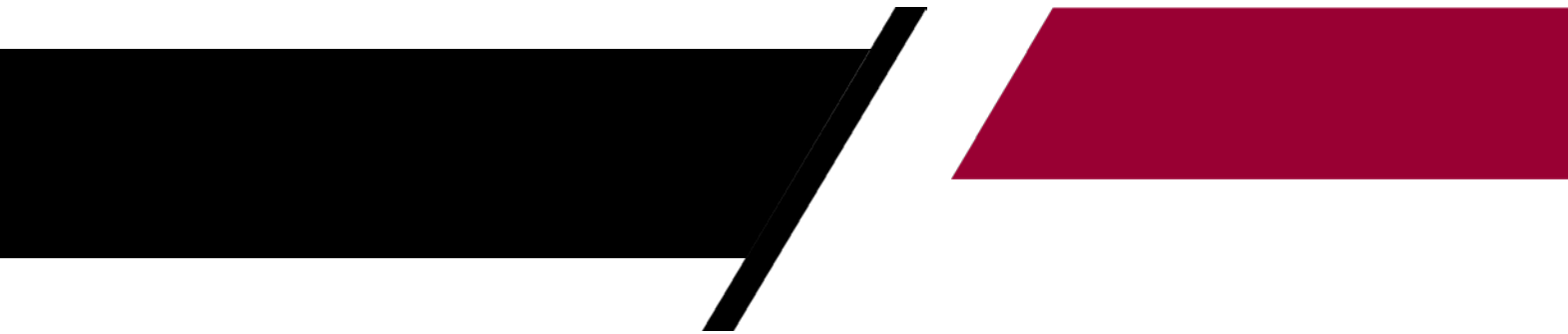




ICT in community policing: some recommendations based on the INSPEC2T project

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Eticas R&C

This document is based on Eticas research for the INSPEC2T project, conducted by Gemma Galdón Clavell, José María Zavala and Mariano Martín Zamorano.

Authors: Lorenzo Olivieri and Gabriel Mimoune.

ICT in community policing

Executive summary


Community policing is a debated concept, which has sought to define a participatory and inclusive approach to law enforcement activities in urban areas. During the last decades this approach has been boosted by the development of ICT and different data driven tools that have permitted to strengthen virtual relations between police officers and neighbors. Still, the ethical and privacy implications of this process have not been properly weighed and systematized. This was one of the goals of Eticas participation in INSPEC2T EU project, which was aimed at developing an ICT policing tool guided by a communitarian model. In this report, after shortly defining the main concepts around ITC community policing, we reflect the main societal and ethical implications of this endeavor, summarize relevant fieldwork outputs of the INSPEC2T project and point out some recommendations derived from the project's findings.

Introduction

During the early 80s community policing (CP) was introduced in the U.S. because of a general dissatisfaction with law enforcement agencies (LEAs); it was thought to be an effective way to reduce victimization through deterrence and thereby increase confidence in policing. Yet, the earliest attempts, such as car patrols, lacked effectiveness since they were in practice reactive and hence failed to act preemptively. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) offer new ways to achieve the desired results making them appealing to LEAs as well as the wider public.

Notably, contemporary digital technologies provide platforms facilitating communication, however, just as importantly they provide new sources and methods for acquiring relevant information in real time. E.g. the I-store app *TapShield*¹ crowd-sources policing by directly linking the individual to the police through, for instance, silent alarms and an extensive use of GPS tracking. It also builds on community-based approaches such as route sharing and notifications to friends or family about the estimated time of arrival. Hence the app can give the citizen an increased sense of

¹ <https://www.cr80news.com/news-item/tapshield-app-crowd-sources-collaborates-with-law-enforcement/>




security while allowing the police to match up data of 'unsafe areas' with crimes and presumably police more efficiently with an improved resource distribution; responding directly to community needs.

More fundamentally, however, the idea of community participation is largely based on the presumption that it will allow LEAs to proactively engage with crime, preventing it rather than intervening after the fact. This can, if not correctly executed, hamper with the presumption of innocence; a governing principle in a *rule of law* society, which makes necessary ethical and societal assessments of individual projects using ICTs for CP.

Addressing these issues, this report is based on INSPEC2T (Inspiring CitizeNS Participation for Enhanced Community PoliCing ACTions); a European Union Project that aimed to develop an innovative concept of security by combining the principles of community policing with the new possibilities offered by ICTs. The project, developed under the program H2020-FCT-2014 of the EC, sought to achieve this by creating a platform for seamless collaboration between police and a target community enabling real-time two-way communication. As an ethical partner in the INSPEC2T project, Eticas highlighted potential benefits and risks based on a case study with focus groups from six LEAs and six citizens' groups in six different European cities (Athens, Belfast, Nicosia, Groningen, Preston, and Valencia).

Framing the relation between ICT and community policing


The main idea behind community policing is to enable police officers to foresee possible crimes while developing a stronger bond with the community in which they operate. Given these premises, the possibilities opened by ICT in this field are inevitably appealing. Furthermore, in this framework the use of social media might represent a way to increase the transparency of police communication with citizens and the accountability of policemen themselves, as they can be used for policing the police. The communication possibilities offered by social media also allow for the development of para-policing initiatives originating from the civil society, commonly defined as neighborhood watch.



However, negative consequences might also result from activities of community policing. First of all, the deployment of ICTs might benefit those sectors of the population with access to the web and a good level of digital literacy, while neglecting other groups, such as elderly, low-income or disabled people, leading to what is known as “digital divide”. Second, crowdsourcing information can lead to false rumors or accusations which might have negative impact both on police activities and on the victims of unverified or misleading information. Third, relying on historical databases, statistical data and correlations, can foster racial profiling and reproduces biases, prejudices and discrimination against minorities. Fourth, predictive policing can violate the ‘presumption of innocence’ principle that should drive democratically justified policing, evoking dystopian scenarios depicted by movies like *Minority Report*.

Other undesired societal consequences tied to community policing include the normalization of surveillance, through processes as scaling up of deviance, self-censorship and social segregation, or the support and participation of extremists in activities of neighborhood watch, which could reinforce and enact prejudices and resentments against minorities. Finally, the public sharing of sensitive information might harm not only the offenders, making more difficult the re-socialization of the criminal, but also provokes re-traumatization episodes for the victims.

Beyond these general observations about the potentialities and eventual negative outcomes of community policing based on ICT, it is worth to highlight that the concept of community policing is not a clear-cut notion that uniformly applies independently from its context of implementation. As Johnston (2005) notes, it is not clear, for instance, whether foot patrol is a necessary component of community policing or whether any instance of decentralized command constitute evidence of community policing. Police and police officers, their role and activities, are in fact perceived differently according to different countries. For instance, in the context of continental European legal culture, police is assigned the role of representative of state power (and monopoly of force), while in Anglo-Saxon countries police is historically much stronger integrated into community life (Britannica 2018).




Likewise, it is hard to provide a definition of community able to cover the different contexts in which the concept is used. The term is usually used for referring to groups of people which display ethnic, cultural and social homogeneity and live in the same physical space, such as a small city or a rural village. However, the concept of community also includes a strong performative dimension, namely the idea that are the members who actively make the community, by discussing and deciding about issues relevant for it. Indeed, both *police* and *community* require specification since they will be historically and culturally contingent.

The rise of urbanization and the social and economic dynamics connected to it, has produced a radically different form of living together and sharing spaces in many parts of the world. Contemporary cities are in fact often analyzed and understood as conglomerate of individuals with weakened social bonds, a situation which requires a model of governance radically different from one which has 'community' as its outset. For instance, while in a community, problems are usually solved by confronting with neighbors and other members of the community, the maintenance of order in cities characterized by individualization further depend on public authorities and bureaucratic administration. This does not mean that the notion of community cannot find place in the context of cities (Gans; 1962, 1967; Hofferth and Iceland, 1998).

Another dichotomy that can help to articulate the idea of community policing and its challenges is the one between geographical communities and virtual communities. The former share a physical space and its members come into face to face contact by virtue of proximity (not necessarily out of interest or intent), while the latter are groups of people that interact via ICT or communication media in general, and they can associate on the basis of common interests, backgrounds, concerns. In this respect, one of the main challenge of community policing is to merge these two domain in order to create communication channels which efficiently connect police offers with the population. According to this perspective, ICT tools can be a way to enhance community connections, feelings of trust, knowledge sharing, engagement and communality.

To conclude this short review about the difficulties in providing a precise and comprehensive definition of ICT based community policing it is worth to report the more




critical perspective offered by Johnston (2005). Johnston suggests in fact to treat the concept of community policing as a rhetorical device, rather than as a substantive policy. According to him, community policing tends to depict an imagined past where society was less characterized by conflicts and less impersonal than today. But, he notes, this image of community is both a poor representation of the past and a bad predictor of the future, and community policing might end up in supporting a model of security governance that is both nostalgic, in the idealized representation of past communities, and state centric, as police claims sovereignty over the community. However, as he adds, the cultural and ethnic diversity that increasingly characterize contemporary communities challenge the police to develop new ways for dealing with the plurality of social life and, in such context, technology can play a salient role.

ICT in community policing

While an accurate conceptualization of community policing might be a hard task due to the pluralities of social and cultural contexts, a review of some of projects and initiatives might help to better evaluate the ethical and societal implications of community policing. To begin with, police tend to make a large use of privately owned social network platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube or Whatsapp. These tools are used to enhance the communication with the community and to make more transparent and reliable police work. For instance, the freeware application *Police Tape*², released by the American Civil Liberties Union, allows civilians to record law enforcement encounters (ACLU, 2012). The use of online and social media proved to be fundamental also in case of natural disasters or terroristic attacks, such as the Asian Tsunami in 2004, Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the Haitian earthquake in 2010. In these occasions social networks facilitated the communication with the population and enabled to search for lost relatives or friends.

But social networks are also used for more or less formal crowdsourcing and para-policing initiatives of neighborhood watch. To make an example, the city of Los Angeles developed the so-called [*Large Emergency Event Digital Information Repository*](#)


² https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/10/police-abuse-apps_n_7036442.html?guccounter=1



([LEEDIR](#)), an “eyewitness platform” where citizens upload files or broadcast their webcams to share photos and videos of crime scenes, incidents, or other relevant material during large scale events, attacks, disasters and so forth. *TapShield*, the above mentioned social safety application, aims to make citizens feel safer, especially when walking the streets at night. Through the app citizens are directly and continuously connected to the police via their phone and can rely on crowd-sourced information about incidents. Initiatives of neighbourhood watch, spontaneously emerging from the civil society, can utilize these technologies as well. In Austria, the [Pro-Neighbour Association](#), an organization of activists, collects ‘intelligence’ data and uses its Internet platforms to share reports of what citizens deem suspicious behaviour and suspicious individuals.

However, this also raises concerns over unintended and negative outcomes of crowdsourcing in relation to CP. For example, in occasion of the Boston Marathon Bombing police started to gather crowd-source information about the tragic events occurred, but this process also triggered “internet detectives” who begun to make speculative hypothesis on the basis of the pictures seen on the web. The false accusations led to insults and threats which had strong negative repercussions on the victims. Similarly, tools explicitly designed to improve the safety of citizens or users might also raise issues of social justice regarding racial profiling, discrimination or the perpetuation of prejudices. This is the case of two apps, [Sketch Factor](#) and [Pedestrian Route](#), which were designed to enable users to provide and share information about dangerous or sketchy zones in urban areas. However, as the comments inserted were not reviewed and were more the result of opinions than of evidence, the apps did not really fulfil their purpose, and, on the contrary, appeared to be above all a way for voicing biases against minorities and poor people.

Furthermore, community policing projects can often generate undesired effects from a police perspective. One of the most emblematic case is the Twitter campaign launched by the New York Police department to incentive people to post pictures with members of the department. The aim of the project was to promote a positive view of police officers, but,



contrary to the expectations, people started using the hashtag #myNYPD to share episodes or pictures of police brutality³.

Such examples of failures of community policing projects stress that, despite good intentions, the flexibility of use allowed by many technologies might produce detrimental consequences for the members of the communities. In light of this, some provisional deductions about the design of tools for community policing can be drawn. Following Galdon Clavell *et al.* (2018), the prevention and mitigation of potential risks related to the implementation of ICT-based CP projects must consider a wide range of factors:

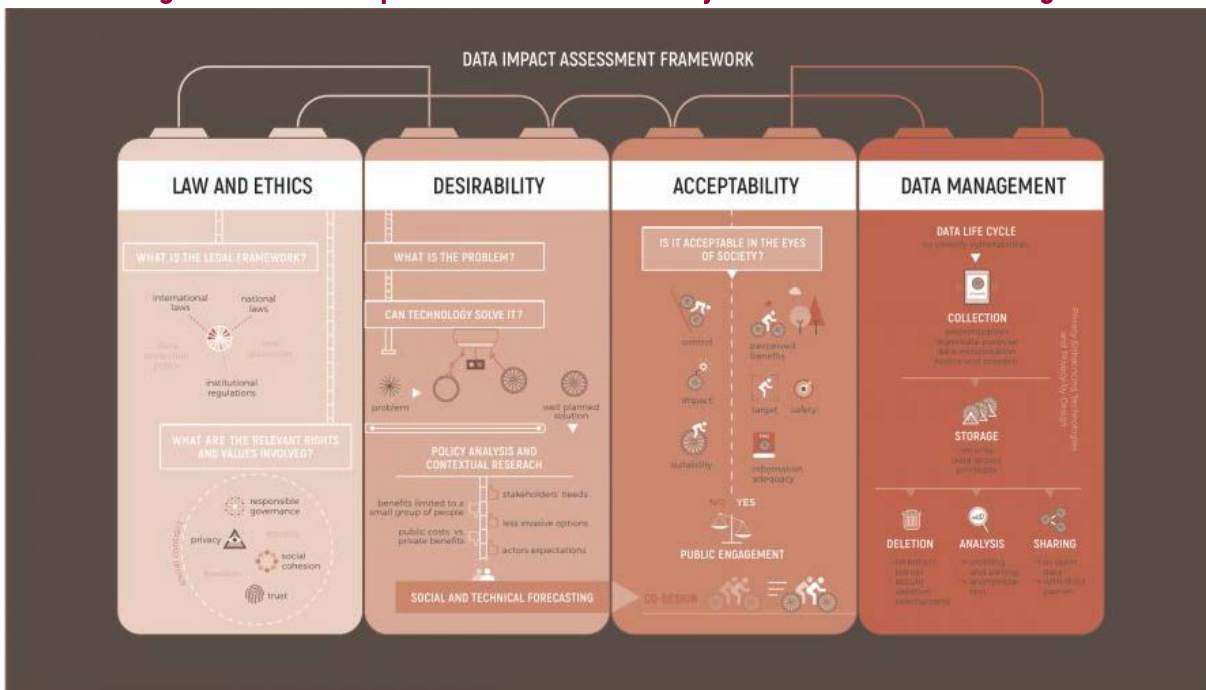
- ✓ Firstly, all the stakeholders, including officers, victims, suspects, witnesses, etc., must play a role in the design and assessment phases.
- ✓ Secondly, the involvement of citizens in crowdsource platform and activities should not come at the expense of their personal safety.
- ✓ Thirdly, the conjunction of ICTs and security inevitably raises concerns regarding increased surveillance which threaten privacy guarantees.
- ✓ Finally, the data gathered through community policing activities must be carefully treated in order to avoid misinformation, rumours and false accusations which can have a negative impact on the community members.

INSPEC2T fieldwork findings

The empirical work developed within INSPEC2T project, further introduced an analytical model consisting of four pillars (Fig. 1): the desirability (the utility of the technology), the acceptability (the referent community's reception of the technology), the ethics (how the technology fits within the embedded values in a referent community) and, finally, data management (the technology's consequences in terms of data protection and privacy).

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/23/mynypd-twitter-call-out-new-york-police-backfires>

Figure 1. Eticas' conceptual framework for the analysis of data intensive technologies




By addressing the above different levels of analysis during a set of focus groups conducted with LEAs officers, and interviews with citizens involved in INESPEC2T project fieldwork, the following main conclusions were reached:

➤ Desirability

There was a consensus among citizens about the preventive effect of having CP officers. Furthermore, LEAs agreed that local implementation allows for more efficient mediation through the direct monitoring of potential conflicts. Yet, the benefit of community proximity was by some LEAs also highlighted as a drawback as they felt estranged from the institution they represented. This meant that they also to a greater extent had the impression that the financial constrains facing the institution were affecting them directly. Lack of resources is, therefore, highlighted as an impediment to effective CP.

➤ Acceptability

Citizens generally valued CP as a deterrent. This was the case for most population segments, even in cases of budget cuts. The young and certain minority groups, however,



constituted an exception. The LEAs furthermore, highlighted that they often lacked educational tools. Some participants had taken privately financed courses to acquire the necessary skills for effective CP covering areas as broad as psychology and housing and community management.

➤ Ethics


According to the project findings, the inclusion of CP may strengthen certain community values such as resilience, trust and cooperation. Yet, active participation in CP was for both parties limited by their lack of education. Again, the LEAs highlighted a lack of precise contextualized guidelines. That CP was not clearly defined also led to doubts among citizens especially in terms of how interaction with the CP officers would work. Here the importance of anonymity was further highlighted as participants crucially wanted to avoid being categorized as “snitches”.

➤ Data management

ITCs was generally regarded as providing a limitless array of solutions. Yet the participants acknowledged that there was a balance between privacy and efficiency. Indeed, data protection was highly valued amongst the participants. In particular, in relation to the anonymity of informants and phone images being used as evidence but also to social media in general. Citizens worried about the precise use of their data; e.g., who would have access to it. Generally, the confusion highlighted worries about increasing surveillance practices. LEAs adopted a pragmatic stance to these issues but demanded technical support for platforms that would allow real-time connection with citizens.

INSPEC2T-based recommendations

Community policing combined with ICTs is seen as efficient in a context where LEAs are perceived as having their resources stretched. To use it well both LEAs and citizens, however, demand education: technology generally raises expectations but participants find it difficult to keep up with it. In this context, it may be particularly well-used if targeted at youth. In this framework, the following points should be particularly considered:

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- ✓ Communities need to be further included in defining the objectives that the tools of CP are to address. This should help ensure that certain groups are not excluded from the benefits of CP, hence group and stakeholder plurality needs to be considered when designing a CP strategy.
 - ✓ Context heterogeneity needs to be considered. Following the first point, there is no 'one size fits all' model for CP.
 - ✓ Policing strategies should be careful not to alienate trust as it is essential for effective CP. Hence oversight and transparency should not be considered as 'trade-offs' to effective policing, but rather included in a policing strategy.
 - ✓ "Crowd-sourcing" should respect the privacy of both the victim and the perpetrator as much as possible as it can otherwise result in defamation and the construction of social biases with real-life consequences. It also follows from this point that its role of civilians in security should be limited.
 - ✓ Anonymity of participants in CP should be protected as much as possible. This may in turn inspire more people to participate. Geo-localization should in this context also be limited to the extent possible.
 - ✓ LEAs and citizens should avoid reutilizing people's data without it having been formally vetted. This should diminish the probability of misuse.
 - ✓ CP technologies should be kept as simple as possible for the purpose they are meant to serve. This will avoid technologies being created for the sake of technologies and reduce the likelihood of exclusion of disfavored parts of the population. This, however, implies that objectives must be clearly defined from the outset.
 - ✓ Lastly, it is necessary to ensure that the ICT tools that are developed are allocated an appropriate amount of resources both in terms of their maintenance and of training to the officers and the public who must use them; officers having to rely on their private resources for training is no guarantee for effective CP. Knowledge of the tools should be sufficiently simple to be easily transferable, adaptable and understandable.



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