

L2917: Policy Analysis

Short Paper 2: Policy memo

Safe neighbourhoods initiatives rely on evidence developed in partnership with local stakeholders and communities.

What type of practices can be used for taking into account evidence stemming from “local knowledge” (Fleming and Rhodes, 2018)?

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Safe neighbourhoods' initiatives in Scotland rely on evidence to inform policy and create effective change. The methods of evidence collection vary, but the gold standard is believed to be Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs). These involve randomly assigning a treatment and a control group, in which an action is unknowingly performed on the treatment group, with the control group for comparison (Fleming & Rhodes, 2017:4). In contrast, local knowledge involves the opinion and often the practice of people within one local community for example, police officers providing a specific outlook on one community at a specific time. Utilizing the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), this paper will outline the use of local knowledge in safe neighbourhood initiatives in contrast to RCTs, with the Scottish Government as the policy broker. This policy memo will recommend the best practice for using the evidence gathered from local knowledge, considering this from an ACF viewpoint.

Safe Neighbourhoods Background

Safe neighbourhood initiatives in Scotland have the goal of increasing the safety of Scottish neighbourhoods and strengthening the safety felt by the community. The safety felt within communities is paramount to people living a fulfilled life without the fear of crime, meaning this is an issue of paramount importance to policymakers when considering an individual's quality of life. Sheil, Clark and Richards (2005), from the Community Safety Network, outline the approaches to targeting increased community safety through measures such as; improved street lighting, additional policing, and the removal of signs of previous acts of vandalism - all effectively reducing crime levels and the fear of crime within neighbourhoods (Sheil et al, 2005: 2). Approaches like this have significantly improved the safety of Scottish neighbourhoods, making the public feel safer within

their communities. The Scottish Crime and Justice Survey 2017/18 revealed that people are feeling the safest they have ever felt within their communities since the survey began, and there has been a reduction in the proportion of adults experiencing crime; falling to one-in-eight in 2017/18 compared to one-in-five in 2008/09 (Scottish Government, 2018). Therefore, crime levels have fallen in recent years making communities safer, however it remains an important issue. The safe neighbourhood initiatives have contributed to this reduction through the implementation of targeted approaches based upon the evidence presented. The evidence gathered is relied upon for further intervention and partnerships with local stakeholders and communities. The quality of the evidence gathered, for the targeted interventions, is crucial to ensure that developments are achieved.

Advocacy Coalition Framework

Advocacy Coalition Framework was originally developed through an attempt to better develop theories and empirics for understanding the policy processes. The framework was created by Paul Sabatier and Hank Jenkins-Smith as a contribution to the policy process. ACF focuses on the coalitions of actors that form within a 'policy subsystem'; in this case safe neighbourhood initiatives and the evidence sources are the coalitions. These are based upon a position of shared values and beliefs that they advocate for specific policy positions (Browne et al, 2018: 1036). The opposing coalitions are two contrasting methods of gathering evidence in relation to safe neighbourhood initiatives. Within this framework, the two opposing coalition groups for this analysis are local knowledge as one coalition, and Randomized Controlled Trails (RCTs) in the other. Through analysing the different methods, using ACF, it will emphasize the benefits of each; introducing a different perspective when considering safe neighbourhood initiatives, and the appropriate source of evidence developed by partnerships from local stakeholders and communities.

Analysis using ACF

Local knowledge influences the practice of specific services in certain areas, relying on the opinion of individuals to influence the future of policies. According to Yanow (2004) local knowledge is “typically developed within a community of practitioners” making it “local knowledge” (Yanow, 2004: 10). Looking at policing specifically in relation to the topic of safe neighbourhoods - according to the research conducted by Fleming and Rhodes (2017) - a distinction is made between experience in local knowledge and experience as a craft. Craft refers to a skill which is perfected overtime, in this case it is referring to specific areas which have police officers who have crafted their skill over years of service (Fleming & Rhodes, 2017: 8). Thus, one of the advantages of local knowledge is the advice given by individuals who have worked in an area for years on end, passing their knowledge on to one another. Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) are effective in providing evidence on what works in a specific setting with a specific group of people. This points out the best way to move forward with policy change, utilizing scientific methods of data collection which are considered to be the most reliable source of information (Cairney, 2019: 3). In contrast to this view, the use of RCTs in community safety measures may not be appropriate. The use of RCTs is considered to be distant from the local community, the area in which the policies are in place to improve. Therefore, local knowledge is paramount when considering policies in place in specific communities when discussing safe neighbourhoods. This is because police officers - who are crucial to the reduction in local crimes - have knowledge of their own. RCTs influence the wider policy knowledge, but, local knowledge influences the practice in specific areas as RCTs cannot always be applied to every context.

Research conducted by social scientists like RCTs have their downfalls. Lindblom (1990) emphasises the “impairments” of social science knowledge, which include: “incomplete information; lack of time; limited cognitive and technical skills; the complexity of problems; theories that cannot predict; and hypothesis that we either cannot or have not been tested.” (Lindblom, 1990: 136). Politics can influence the focus of the research; this is because the policy broker – the Scottish Government – is

often responsible for the research which is funded. Therefore, research can be biased towards specific topics of interest to either the public or to the politicians, in order to ensure that they are providing evidence that gives the appearance that initiatives have been effective. Further to this, some of the police officers expressed the feelings of being detached from research, suggesting that many officers do not see the relevance and suggest that just because something works in one setting does not mean it will apply to all (Fleming & Rhodes, 2017: 17). RCTs are reliant on the politics of the government of the day, meaning that what is investigated is influenced by the issue with the greatest political influence. Therefore, RCTs are effective in gathering data in relation to a specific problem and testing out a solution. However, there are clear downfalls of research conducted in this way due to the issues surrounding gathering of social science evidence. Local knowledge, on the other hand, is more in touch with the police officers on the ground and it is therefore, generally, free from this bias. The individuals on the ground can understand where specific interventions are being productive and alternatively can recognize areas for improvement. In relation to the topic of safe neighbourhoods, local knowledge is of great importance because it is more in touch with the community, as opposed to RCTs which are typically more unfamiliar with local areas.

Policy recommendation

Moving forward, this paper recommends that each side of the argument has its benefits. The ACF was beneficial for analysing the two research methods by way of different coalitions discussing their individual advantages and disadvantages. Overall, local knowledge needs to be considered at each stage of the safe neighbourhood initiatives. Those in the local community have the most knowledge of a specific problem within their local areas. They will have better insight of how best to change said problem on a case-by-case basis rather than as a national issue. RCTs provide examples of changes which have been effective in other areas as recommendations for best practice. The initiatives introduced in one area need to be specific to the problems in that area, with local knowledge informing this. Through doing so it will target specific problems, helping to improve the safety of

Scottish communities. Overall, to use a quote from Fleming and Rhodes (2017): “There are many sources of knowledge and we need to weave them together. In this weaving, local knowledge, or experience, is one source of evidence, and is essential given the limits of social science knowledge.” (Fleming & Rhodes, 2017: 20). Consequently, when looking at initiatives to improve the safety of communities, the most important informer should be local knowledge; second to the research foundation provided by social science research, informing what has worked in other areas - taking the politics out the equation and leading to more effective outcomes.

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