Title: Ethnographic approaches and policing beyond the police: Reflections from a recent study

Abstract: Policing is a set of activities and processes variously performed by a range of professional and ordinary people. Whilst this has become an established premise within sociologies of policing, few contributions beyond those provided by professionals have featured as subjects of ethnographic inquiry. This disparity may be explained by a number of factors. In an age of complex expert systems, the policing contributions of ordinary people may seem enigmatic, niche, or simply less significant than those provided elsewhere. As limited, lay contributions, examples may be considered as carrying fewer implications for other policing organisations, policymakers or communities. Interest might also be dampened by practical matters – the often-sporadic and inconsistent manifestation of such contributions, for instance, may make the substantial degree of engagement required for an ethnographic study seem an insurmountable challenge. This paper provides a response to the general sentiment of these explanations, and departs from the professional-centric orientation of policing research, by drawing upon experiences of conducting ethnographic research within case studies of three volunteer citizen patrol initiatives – each set in separate geographical locations, characterised by unique organisational structures, and marked by varying degrees of autonomy. By reflecting upon the processes of designing the empirical approach of the study, as well as the practical tasks of gaining access, and collecting and analysing data, a number of arguments are presented. First, designing ethnographic approaches to account for the policing contributions of ordinary people, along with the values that underpin them, requires flexible interpretations of the broader methodological approach. Second, on a practical level, the informal nature of such contributions presents both unique opportunities and challenges for ethnographic researchers – distinct from those experienced when researching policing on a professional level. Finally, third, beyond these, further ethnographic research on the contributions of ordinary people is essential to developing a more holistic interpretation of whole policing systems, and the points of connection that lie within.