Review of the Police Liaison Officer Program in Queensland

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1: Introduction

This project was undertaken in 2006/07 in collaboration with the Queensland Police Service. The overall aim of the project was to conduct a qualitative review of the Queensland Police Liaison Officer (PLO) program. The emphasis of the study was to understand how PLOs effectively facilitate police/community collaboration, the challenges they face in engaging external community groups and their overall level of job satisfaction with the PLO position. Another aim was to identify any implementation problems associated with the PLO program and to record examples of how PLOs improve the overall functioning of the QPS relating to facilitating police/community relations. The identification of possible problems and success stories was a key objective of this study.

Section 2 of this report provides background information on the PLO program. Section 3 outlines the research design and provides demographic data on the interview sample. The method of data collection and analysis is described as well as limitations of the research design. Section 4 outlines key results of the research. The main aim has been to highlight consistencies in the data. This helps to improve the reliability of the qualitative interview results. When there is consistency across interview data it strengthens the validating of any conclusions. However in some instances cases that contradict consistent themes are highlighted. This is important in the examination of possible rival explanations relating to particular issues. The consideration of both consistent and inconsistent findings is particularly pertinent in the current study given PLOs expressed quite diverse opinions and experiences. This occurred between PLOs of similar racial/ethnic backgrounds and across the interview sample as a whole. Despite this diversity there were common themes that anchored the experiences of PLOs within the QPS.

The evidence presented here indicates that there exist some minor problems with the administration of the PLO program. A number of the problems identified in this report should be regarded as unintended consequences of having designated liaison roles whose remit is to engage culturally and ethnically diverse communities. Since this research was conducted in 2006/07 the QPS has undertaken an evaluation of PLO role descriptions,
activities, training, remuneration, career development and existing support mechanisms. The aim has been to strengthening the PLO program. This project illustrates that PLOs face a challenging task and it is important they receive support from senior police, with their role promoted to uniform staff. As a resource PLOs help break down language and cultural barriers, facilitate greater levels of community collaboration in addressing crime and safety problems, and encourage people to identify issues of local concern and become involved in working towards solutions. While the notion of community liaison and engagement is difficult to quantify and measure, the PLO experience as discussed in this report indicates that much of the hard work of PLOs goes unrecognised, with their activities contributing both directly and indirectly to the effectiveness of sworn uniform staff.
2: Overview of the Queensland Police Liaison Officer Program

Community policing is a key operational goal of the Queensland Police Service. Underlying this philosophy is liaison with the community which is essential to facilitating productive police/community partnerships. Police services around Australia have developed partnership strategies specifically aimed at engaging culturally diverse communities (Chui & Ip 2005; Cherney & Chui 2008; Nao 2002). A factor driving such developments has been strained relationships between the police and external community groups. Allegations have been levelled at police organisations that they disproportionately target members of particular ethnic communities, with there existing evidence that police can act in racially motivated ways when coming into contact with groups of a certain racial, ethnic or cultural background (e.g. Aborigines, Asians and Muslims) (Chan 1997). Also evidence indicates that ethnic groups display low levels of trust and confidence in the police which undermines police/community cooperation (Murphy & Cherney forthcoming).

The QPS PLO program was developed to address the social and cultural barriers between police and Indigenous and multicultural communities. The program was implemented throughout Queensland in response to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADC). The RCIADC made the following recommendation:

Recommendation 231
That different jurisdictions pursue their chosen initiatives for improving relations between police and Aboriginal people in the form of police aides, police liaison officers and in other ways; experimenting and adjusting in the light of the experience of other services and applying what seems to work best in particular services. (RCIADIC 1991:152).

The PLO program was originally based upon a Police Liaison Scheme operating in Thursday Island (Far North Queensland) which was trialled in Townsville and subsequently expanded throughout Queensland in an attempt to address the entrenched conflict that existed between police and Aboriginal people. PLOs were expected to assist
communication with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons and to help divert Indigenous people from police custody.

Similar programs exist in other Australian states with PLOs referred to as Aboriginal/Multicultural Liaison Officers in South Australia, Ethnic Community Liaison Officers in New South Wales, Multicultural Liaison Officers in the Australian Capital Territory, Victoria and Western Australia, and Ethnic Liaison Officers in Tasmania and the Northern Territory. While these programs intend to achieve the same objectives such as reducing and preventing crime, enhancing police awareness about cultural diversity, improving community awareness of the police role and generating greater confidence within ethnic communities towards the police, initiatives do vary in how they are administrated (APMAB 2005).

Since the 1990s there has been a diversification of PLO recruitment throughout Queensland to include PLOs of Chinese, Vietnamese, Samoan, Sudanese, Arabic speaking and South Sea Islander backgrounds. Approximately 85% of PLOs identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. PLOs are ‘civilians in uniform’, meaning they are not sworn police officers and do not possess similar statutory powers as sworn uniform police. PLOs do wear a uniform that loosely resembles a police uniform the most distinguishing feature being the PLO yellow epaulettes. The scope of PLO duties in relation to assisting uniform staff in the exercise of their powers are narrow, as they are only called upon to assist police officers to detain, arrest, search or fingerprint in exceptional circumstances and according to strict guidelines (PLO 2006). For instance, at domestic violence incidents PLOs may be asked to help explain reporting and legal procedures to the perpetrator or victim. Because of their language skills and cultural background, they have been utilised to explain criminal and court procedures to victims and their families with limited English.

The primary roles of PLOs are to establish and maintain a positive rapport between Indigenous and multicultural communities and the police, to assist members of the community in accessing policing services and advise on referrals to other community services where appropriate. In many Queensland Police districts PLOs are employed who
match the ethnic and cultural background of the community in which they are to be stationed. Hence a police district that has a high Asian population will aim to deploy an Asian PLO. This though does not mean that they will be expected to only engage their particular community, with PLOs required to maintain relations with groups outside their own ethnic identity or cultural background. PLOs maintain regular contact with diverse community groups in order to identify local community concerns and to assist in the development of crime prevention strategies. This includes patrolling in public places including shopping malls and parks and partaking in community events. Such activities ensure PLOs are in constant contact with members of relevant community groups. PLOs also proactively target at risk groups such as the homeless.
3: Research Design

The QPS has conducted a number of internal evaluations of the PLO program, with these reviews conducted in 2001, 2005 and 2007. The current research was an independent project to explore:

- The types of activities PLOs engage in and assess their effectiveness in relation to their intended objectives.
- The pressures and competing demands placed upon PLOs and how these impact on their roles.
- How PLOs enhance other QPS strategies in the area of community safety, engagement and cultural awareness, and if they are well placed to do so.
- The core skills/knowledge bases and backgrounds of PLOs.
- The quality of training provided to PLOs and identify whether the training adequately equips them to carry out their role.
- The impact of the PLO uniform in facilitating their community liaison role.

The project involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with 30 PLOs from different police regions throughout Queensland, including Brisbane, Cairns and Townsville. In addition, formal and informal focus group interviews were carried out with a total of seven key personnel from the Police Headquarters who manage the PLO program and conducted induction training and on-the-job training for PLOs.

Interview Sample

The interviewee sample were overwhelming Indigenous as illustrated in table 1 below, with 67% (n=20) of the interviewees reporting either to be Aboriginal or Torres Straight Islander. This is not a surprising result given both the origin of the PLO program and is representative of the overall PLO demographic. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the self-reported racial/ethnic status of interviewees. While their overall numbers are low, PLOs of a variety of ethnic backgrounds were represented in the interview sample. The gender composition of the sample was evenly split between male and female respondents (see
table 3). Information was also collected from interviewees on their PLO rank. As can be seen in table 4 the majority of interviewees were ranked as PLOs (53% n=16), with 40% (n=12) reporting they were senior PLOs and 7% (n=2) reporting that they were PLO Coordinators.
The years of service as PLOs varied between interviewees who reported over 10 years as a PLO, to respondents who had less than 12 months experience. At the time of conducting the research the mean years of service for the sample was 6.5 years, indicating that it was a fairly experienced group.
Caution must be heeded in generalising from this sample given it is a sample of only 30 PLOs. This does influence the degree to which one can generalise from these results to other PLOs in Queensland or similar PLO programs in Australia. However the make-up of the sample in relation to its racial and ethnic mix does reflect more broadly the overall composition of PLO personnel.

**Data Analysis**

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed in the qualitative software package NVivo 8 and the text analysis software Leximancer version 3. The interview data was initially coded in NVivo 8 in what are called free nodes on the basis of the following core concept/themes developed from the research questions and which framed the interview schedule:

- Examples of reducing misunderstanding
- Addressing community problems
- Core knowledge and skills
- Understanding of PLO role
- On the job demands and pressures
- PLO uniform

Once the content of interview data had been allocated to these broad themes, these free nodes were coded into their unique subcategories (i.e. tree nodes) to represent their various dimensions (Bazeley 2007). For example the free node Understanding of the PLO Role was divided into six separate dimensions of the basis of the various issues identified within the data. This included (a) clear understanding of PLO role among uniform staff; (b) clear understanding of PLO role among PLOs; (c) unclear understanding of PLO role among uniform staff; (d) unclear understanding of PLO role among PLOs (e) ways of improving understanding of PLO role; (f) understanding of PLO role within the community. Interview data was then divided among these trees nodes. An identical approach to mapping the various dimensions of PLO experience was adopted for all the themes outlined above.
Leximancer was used to further confirm data analysis and identify relationships between interviewee transcripts. Leximancer is a text analysis software that identifies core concepts within textual data, clarifies the properties of these concepts and illustrates how they are related. Themes or concept groupings are identified in the interview data that represent the clustering of both key word like phrases (e.g. uniform) and name-like concepts (e.g. PLO or QPS). Leximancer analyses data through word co-coherence and can identify relationships between concepts both within and between different data sources. Concepts should be understood as the key issues arising from the interview data. The output produced by Leximancer provides a visual representation of these concepts and relationships, and a means of quantifying and displaying the conceptual structure of a set of interview transcripts. It also allows the user to request overviews of interview transcripts and key text segments in relation to specific issues as represented by key word or name like concepts. The direction of these relationships can be analysed and illustrated in the Leximancer map (illustrated by a white arrowed line – see section 4). An analytical approach was used in which system identified concepts (that is concepts identified by the Leximancer software) and user defined concepts (that is concepts stipulated by the researchers) were used to develop visual maps from the interview data. User defined concepts ensure that concepts of interest e.g. problems, uniform, police, liaison, will be analysed and captured in the resulting map produced by Leximancer.
4: Key Results

Examples of Reducing Misunderstanding

The term “liaison” encompasses a broad range of activities and when asked to describe a typical day’s work PLOs would report attending community events, conducting follow-ups with victims and offenders, completing paper work, undertaking foot patrols, engaging community leaders, assisting uniform police, inducting new recruits, participating in Police Citizen Youth Club activities and responding to incidents in the police watch house. Given one of the core aims of the PLO program is to improve relations with ethnic communities by making the QPS more culturally aware, it was decided to ask interviewees to cite examples where their actions had helped to reduce misunderstanding between the police and particular ethnic/racial groups. In response PLOs made reference to how they helped the QPS to be more culturally responsive to community problems and assisted with solving issues resulting from misunderstandings on the part of uniform police. Active PLO intervention at times ensured the QPS response was more measured. For example:

“The most recent one was the threat of a riot within our community. There were complaints being made about a specific group of Polynesian men that worked at a local pub who had been targeting Indigenous blokes who were on their own and basically beating them senseless and putting them in hospital. I think over a matter of 2 weeks we had 16 complaints and none of the complaints were taken seriously or forwarded on for investigation by the police officers who took the complaints. We received information that the local group of Indigenous people were going to riot, that family members were coming in from outside of town and basically they were going to target this pub and any police officer who gets in the way. Me and my partner went and spoke to the officer in charge, pulled the inspector in and called a massive community meeting, with the justice group and those involved. And we ended up defusing the situation, the OIC [officer in charge] was made aware of the complaints and yeah, action was taken. So this supposed riot or gang bash was prevented, simply by the quick action of me and my fellow PLO” (Case 26).
“Last week we got a call over the radio, an Indigenous male, approximately 30 years old, done a bag snatch and the security guards caught him down the road from the city and they detained him there. And the guys were just arresting him for you know, stolen bad and I strolled up and I said…I talked to him, I knew him, he’s been a bit of trouble with us, you know. I sort of asked him whose bag it was and he said, ‘oh, it’s my missus,’ and he said the name. And I said, ‘oh yeah, well what’s the problem?’ And he said, ‘oh, these fellas don’t believe me, they’re just going to lock me up for a stolen bag’. So I had a look at the bag and looked at the ID and knew it was his missus and I knew they were together so I said (to the police), ‘oh look, this is his girlfriends bag, are you sure he’s stolen it?’ And they said, “well, all we’ve got is he ran down here so we chased him and we got him.” And he was going to get arrested and chucked in the watch house and I said, ‘no, this is his wife’s bag’. And we got hold of his wife and his wife said, ‘yeah, he hasn’t stolen it, he has my handbag” (Case 20).

Addressing cultural misunderstandings among uniform police and reversing negative perceptions of the police was cited as a key outcome of the PLO role:

“It’s very easy to see that our culture is different. For example, when you’re talking to someone, the Chinese people when they want to show respect to the elderly or respect to someone, they will lower their head down. But when the police are asking someone and the Chinese people try to show respect, police think, ‘oh, you must be hiding something, you don’t want to talk to me’. The officers they always misunderstand that, they always complain: ‘Chinese people, when they talk to me, they always put their head like that and they’re not looking at me so I figure that they’re hiding something’. It’s really important that we explain to the officer that they are just showing respect” (Case 2).

“A lot of the Sudanese people think that when a police officer pulls them over, they’re going to shoot them. And they expressed that; when a police officer stopped them or tried to take their names to do a name check, they would try and run off and they said, ‘well this is what happens in our country, whenever a police officer… you don’t go near a
police officer, you run away.’ And they’ll bring all their bad experiences from whatever
camps they came from to Australia to associate them happening here as well. So that
didn’t take long to break down” (case 10).

“There was a bit of a misunderstanding between a Maori family, their family member
had been deceased and we assisted with taking the family to the ‘John Tom’ Center to
identify the body, there was a bit of cultural misunderstanding where one of the older
men did the hukka outside the Centre for his family member and we just stopped the
police from going towards him because it was just a tradition within their family to say
goodbye to them in that way” (Case 11).

Specifically many Indigenous PLOs made reference to how they directly helped improve
relations between police and Indigenous communities by reversing negative stereotypes
Aboriginal people have towards the police. For example one Indigenous PLO stated:

“Murri people call the police ‘bullymen’, and I always say to people, ‘you know,
bullymen are not all that bad. They’re not that bad after all’. If I can build that
relationship with them and I’m wearing a blue uniform, it’s not so hard for them [Murri
people] to say hello to another guy who’s walking up the street in a blue uniform” (Case
1).

20 out of the 30 interviewees made reference to activities they personally undertake to
improve cultural awareness both within the QPS and externally in the community:

“I try to educate the sworn officer, and talk to a number of the police. I share with them
about my culture, and it is indeed a good chance to tell them a bit of my culture both
formally and informally. In order to promote cultural awareness, I volunteered to give a
presentation each year to the newly recruit police officers while they are still in the
Academy. It is important to let them know who we are and what the Chinese culture is.
In addition, I also give a lot of presentations with social groups in the community about
personal safety and different cultural practices” (Case 30).
**Addressing Community Problems**

Interviewees stated they responded to problems ranging from drink driving, graffiti, public drunkenness, problem youth, domestic violence, and the homeless. This made it difficult for the research to specify a profile of community problems that PLOs are required to address. However, domestic violence stood out for most interviewees, in particular Indigenous PLOs, as a key problem that consumed a large amount of their time. When data was analysed using the Leximancer software, the “problem” concept derived from interview data co-occurred the most with Indigenous and domestic, indicating a strong association between these concepts. On closer scrutiny of the Leximancer map a high level of directionality was evident between each concept, with “family” and “liaison” and “role” also highlighted as important (see map 1 below). There was also overlap with the “time” theme. This illustrates a level of interdependency between these issues in the interview data relating to PLOs committing significant attention to family and domestic issues within Indigenous communities (illustrated by the white arrowed line).

*Map 1: Relationship between problem concept and domestic concept*
In relation to addressing domestic violence the issue of facilitating cultural understanding among the QPS and particular community groups was cited as an important outcome of PLO intervention in domestic violence incidents. One interviewee declared that reversing attitudes towards domestic violence in particular communities was a key component of his work, stating:

“South Pacific Islander people don’t understand the law about domestic violence. Back in the old days, you married your husband and you obeyed him so the lady doesn’t really have anything to say in the family and back at home if your missus sort of gives you lip, you know, not all cases but it’s ok for the husband to beat her up that sort of thing, you know. It’s the old days, whereas these days it’s different. With South Pacific Island cultures, with domestic violence, if it involves police, it’s like you’ve disowned or disrespected your family if you call the police on your husband or your father in law sort of thing, so it brings shame to the family (Case 18).

**Core Knowledge and Skills**

Interviewees were asked to outline the types of core skills and knowledge they believed were essential to the PLO position. Respondents outlined 6 specific areas. From most important to least important they constituted:

- Knowledge of the community and culture;
- Understanding of the Police Powers and Responsibility Act;
- Communication skills;
- Knowledge of community networks; and
- Administrative skills and knowledge.

The importance of cultural understanding to the PLO role was supported by its position in the “understand” theme (green circle) within the Leximancer map, with a clear relationship between this concept and the concepts of “roles” and “importance” (see map 2). Reference to knowledge of the community and culture was not simply confined to the individual PLO’s ethnic or racial background, with respondents stressing the importance
of possessing knowledge about a broad range of culture and groups. For example one PLO stated:

“you’ve got to not only understand yours but other cultures as well. I know in the Vietnamese community, you can’t talk to a girl... not like, in our community. But other cultures are different, with Aboriginal cultures, you can’t look straight at their eyes. So those little things, you’ve got to make sure you’re aware of those little things for all the different cultures” (Case 18).

Map 2: Understanding theme: Directional relationship between culture and important concepts

It was evident though that a minority of PLOs preferred to limit their contact with groups of a similar ethnic or racial background. This was mainly based on concerns they had relating to their lack of understanding about particular cultural practices.

A working knowledge of the Police Powers and Responsibility Act was justified by interviewees as vital because it was essential to them being able to inform the public about “what the police can and can't do”. This was deemed important because PLOs
stated that members of the public would often approach them for advice about police powers compared to uniform police. This was in particular relevant to use of “move on powers” by uniform police, with PLOs often having to justify the use of such powers to community groups, in particular Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. One PLO justified the need to have a working knowledge of police powers in the following way:

"Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are forever asking us. Like they’ll say; ‘How come they’re telling us to move? What right do they have to tell us to move from here? Why have we got to go five blocks away? Why can’t we go three, two blocks away?’ It’s in black and white now about the move-on directions. We need to know what to say to them, we don’t just go up to them and say, ‘hey it’s wrong what you’re doing’. Obviously you’ve got to educate them and say, “you can’t do this because” (Case 1).

There was concern though among interviewees that they did not have a thorough understanding of police powers and that some superiors lacked an appreciation of why a working knowledge of police powers was important to the PLO role. For example one respondent stated:

“I’ve been in the job for ten years and I still don’t understand the whole thing. Like I know basic stuff like move-on powers, because that affects the kids that I work with. And they’ll ask you, you know, ‘Are police allowed to do this to me? Are police allowed to ask me this?’ So that’s basic stuff but I think we should have sort of like a general, good knowledge of the Police Powers and Responsibilities Act....They [in reference to the respondent’s supervisor] need to realize too that we’re out in the general public every day and people are going to ask you these questions and apart from the fact that you don’t want to appear like you’re a dummy, you know, you need to know this stuff (Case 3).

Communication as an important skill was highlighted in the Leximancer map by the formation of a “communicate” concept with “skills” falling within the broader communicate theme (i.e. the blue circle, see map 3 below). The “important concept” was also related to these two concepts.
The other remaining skills and knowledge bases were justified as central to enhancing the communication capacity of PLOs (i.e. knowledge of community networks) as well as ensuring PLOs knew the necessary procedures relating to completing and lodging paperwork (i.e. administrative skills and knowledge).

The need for senior PLOs to mentor junior PLOs was raised as central to enhancing the knowledge and skills of junior liaison officers. This in particular was significant for Indigenous PLOs because it was stated junior Indigenous PLOs often lacked a thorough understanding of their history and did not possess similar forms of culture knowledge (e.g. about clans and family ties – or “ones tribe” as respondents stated). This was not meant as a criticism, but rather recognition that issues of culture and history had less salience for young Indigenous people. Passing on such knowledge to junior PLOs was not only regarded as important to the transmission and preservation of Indigenous history and culture, but had wider relevance to enhancing the capabilities of junior officers to respond effectively to Indigenous issues.
Understanding of the PLO Role

There existed divided opinion relating to whether PLOs themselves and uniform police have a clear understanding of the PLO role. Table 5 below indicates the spread of opinions PLOs expressed regarding this issue. Overall PLOs believed uniform staff lacked an understanding about the PLO role, this particularly pronounced for Indigenous respondents.

Table 5: Coded cases for understanding of PLO role

The main reference to uniform staff’s lack of awareness and appreciation of the PLO role was particularly centered on new police recruits. Having induction processes for recruits that directly involved liaison officers was identified as central to reversing the lack of understanding about the PLO role. Below are examples of quotes made by interviewees relating to this issue:

“I don’t think the recruits understand that they need the PLO. A lot of the new recruits don’t think that” (Case 14).

“The older staff that have worked with PLOs, they’re aware of what we do and what we don’t do, it’s generally the new staff or the staff that are transferred from the cities who have never been in contact with a PLO before who don’t understand what we do or how we operate. ...with the new recruits...because we found that new recruits were the worst, they didn’t know what you did or where you went and all this sort of stuff so we
actually...when they do the introduction to our station, my partner and I sort of go across and tell them what we are and who are the key players in the community and all that sort of stuff” (Case 26).

This lack of understanding of the PLO role among uniform staff was raised as leading PLOs to be tasked with jobs that they considered as inappropriate, or not within the PLO remit of responsibilities. This was seen as potentially having an impact on the relationships PLOs develop with community groups, particularly if they are just perceived as simply assisting in formal policing tasks. For example, one respondent stated that members of the QPS Cultural Advisory Unit should be:

“going out to stations that have PLOs at stations, and sitting down with the management of those stations and saying, ‘look, you’ve got PLOs here; this is what they should be doing. They shouldn’t be going out serving summons on people’. You know, this is not what PLOs should be doing. One [in reference to a fellow PLO] that’s at the station had a lot of complaints from community because the station’s was not using them the right way” (Case 3).

The inappropriate use of PLOs as a consequence of work pressures on uniform staff was raised as a concern. Some believed that it placed PLOs in situations they were ill-prepared to deal with and that threatened their personal safety. Being asked to assist uniform police in highly volatile situations was unsettling for some PLOs, who expressed the need for greater levels of training in restraining people and self defence. The use of PLOs in such circumstances was in-part regarded as resulting from poor clarification of the PLO role among uniform staff and inadequate monitoring of their deployment. One respondent stated:

“There were some PLOs that were going out with uniformed officers and performing the job as a police officer and that’s because of staff restrictions. I’ve even been in a situation where I’ve had to work in the watch house because 3 or 4 people are off sick and I’m the only one left to help out. I mean, they have about 10 or 15 people in the watch house overnight and if anything happened, we wouldn’t have been able to do anything”(Case 8).
There was variability though between interviewees relating to their own understanding of the PLO role and the impact this had on their abilities to identify, undertake and complete relevant tasks. The successful completion of their duties and capacity to fulfil role expectations was particularly reliant upon the active involvement of senior police (in particular the Officer in Charge - OC). This related to providing guidance to PLOs new to the position, and also the OCs own awareness of the PLO program and how liaison officers can contribute to the task of policing. One respondent described this situation in the following way:

“Yeah, I think when coming into the role of PLO, you’re still not exactly sure of what you’re... I mean, you have the induction training and all that but some of your OCs depending on what OC you have, like some could be aware of the role and some that just don’t really know the role, so therefore you’re sort of looking to them to guide you if you’re new. But unless you’re with other PLOs who have been in the job for years and can... I mean you get the training in Brisbane and that after that, there’s none... you’re sort of left on your own, so you’re left to sort of feel your way through it. Depending on where you’re at, what area you’re located to work at, so you have to feel your way through unless you’ve sort of got a mentor person to guide you for the first six months or something” (Case 28).

**On the Job Demands and Pressures**

Working as a PLO was reported as challenging and respondents reported a number of factors that made their role highly stressful and demanding. Three themes stood out as most significant – i.e. 24-7 nature of the PLO role, being allocated all “ethnic jobs” and conflicting expectations.

Interviewees reported that they often worked outside of rostered working hours, and typically described their role as being “24-7”. PLOs were often required to be readably available to assist uniform staff when dealing with individuals of a particular ethnic or racial background. Also many PLOs reported they were often contacted by members of
the public about community problems and felt compelled to respond despite it being a weekend or during periods when they were not rostered on duty. This commitment was often driven by a “sense of responsibility to the community”, as a number of respondents described it. One Indigenous interviewee recalled that in response to incidents involving Indigenous youth:

“I often get rung at home a lot, outside of work hours and not just by community but by police. Two weeks ago I was sitting at home on a Sunday enjoying myself and I got a call about six kids having shoppedlifted at the store and my whole day was taken up trying to ring... because they had the kids at the station and they couldn’t get adults to come and pick these kids up so it was either go to the station and me transport them, but I was just on the phone ringing parents and talking to them about, you know, the right thing to do would be to go pick their kids up from the station because police aren’t baby sitters and they have a duty of care and can’t just release the kids. I mean, I’ve been rung at home and there’s been a young Murri fella committed suicide a couple of months ago. So they rung me at home and I’ve just got up and gone and visited the family. It would be nice to be able to switch off but you can’t because that’s the nature of the role. A lot of people... especially the fellas, will say, ‘Just turn your phone off’. But, I think if you do your job right, that’s all part and parcel of it” (Case 3).

Such work related demands were not made easier by the reported tendency of uniform police to defer jobs involving people of a certain ethnicity or race to PLOs. Interviewees felt that any “ethnic job” was often automatically allocated to them despite the validity and basis of the request and its relevance to the PLO role. There was a concern among interviewees that too high a reliance on PLOs leads uniform staff to neglect developing the necessary skills to engage ethically and culturally diverse groups. PLOs felt that at times uniform police were often too quick to request their assistance, one interviewee stated:

“Some of the people when they see an Asian face they will call me. I once had that experience when I was on my way back home and someone gave me a call – ‘Hey, I need your help! Come back, we have Chinese people here’. So I turn around and go back to the station, park out on the street, run inside there and say, ‘what can I do?’ They said,
'that guy, you need to talk to that guy'. So I talked to him and said, ‘Can you speak Mandarin?’ and he said ‘no’, ‘can you speak Cantonese? ‘No”. ‘Where do you come from?’ ‘Korea’. And I spent 45 minutes to come back and do the job for them but he was Korean. They didn’t even ask, ‘where do you come from?’ Because they see this Asian face – Chinese” (Case 2).

Compounding these demands was also the issue of conflicting expectations that PLOs felt between their responsibilities to the QPS and to the community they identified with either racially, ethnically or culturally. PLOs recognised that first and foremost their loyalties and responsibilities lay with the QPS as their employee, but reported experiencing divided loyalties because of a sense of accountability to their own community – the two were not always seen as compatible. Indigenous PLOs in particular felt such conflicting expectations given the history of relations between the police and Indigenous communities in Australia. The RCIADIC recognised that Indigenous Police Liaison Officers (IPLOs) may experience conflicting expectations over whom they represent and whose interests they are expected to act upon first and foremost. It recognised that IPLOs must walk a professional “tightrope” between their accountability to the police service and to the Indigenous community (RCIADIC 1991b). This can be referred to as role conflict: i.e. defining one’s role according to expectations whether real or imaginary that cannot be reconciled simultaneously. It is an issue that has been studied in the context of policing (e.g. see Regoli & Pool 1980).

It arises because individuals accord meaning to the groups they identify with, whether this be in relation to the organisational setting (e.g. in the context of working for the QPS) or it can be based on social identity (i.e. the ethnic and cultural group PLOs identify with). For each identity/role an individual will accord a recognised set of responsibilities and when these responsibilities are seen as incompatible, role conflict can occur (Biddle 1979). Such responsibilities may arise from the definitions and actions of particular group members. In the context of PLOs this refers to the actions and responses of uniform staff and community members. Reactions by community members in particular generated role conflict for PLOs. One interviewee recalled an episode when:
“We’ve got a predicament where the community’s now back lashing saying it’s our [PLOs] responsibility to take paint off kids... Now it’s coming back on us, whereas before they wanted help, they wanted us to put a stop to this, they wanted the paint thrown out. Now that we’ve stepped in and said ‘come on guys, pull up now, pass that here’, the community has sort of turned around saying, ‘hey, you’re supposed to be looking after our kids, not ripping things out of their hands, standing over them for their paint. You wonder, you know, “which way do you want me to do it?” So we’re going through that at the moment, so it does, you question yourself whether you’re doing the right thing. Are you being respectful? Are you being loyal to your mob; to your community? Are you doing things the correct way it should be done?’ (Case 1).

Another interviewee described role conflict in the following way:

“It’s sort of like a catch-22 where you’re there to do your job for the QPS and if the community is there then you help them as well. But then you get situations where someone has done something and depending on what it is... like, there was an issue one day of a young fella, he’d thrown something at his grandmothers house and I went down to confront him and the grandmother and the other senior officer and she got very offended from it. Because she said, ‘why are you guys here’? It had been a cultural issue and it had been all misunderstood. That was kind of put against me in a sense because of what it’s like: ‘you’re there to help us’. And I said, look I’m here because the young fella stole something” (Case 27).

As stated above the issue of role conflict was particularly pronounced for Indigenous PLOs. This was not helped by the levels of hostility some community members showed towards Indigenous officers as a result of negative attitudes towards the police, and a belief Indigenous PLOs were betraying the Aboriginal community. Two interviewees described this problem in the following way:

“People see us as Aboriginal people but because we’re wearing the uniform, we’re looked on as traitors as well. So they can’t see that we’re here to help them. They might be drunk in the park and they say, ‘Why you sticken’ up for them white fellas? (Case 8).
“Like, when I used to work in the watch house and they used to bring someone in that was arrested and they’d have a go at you. Or like, Murri people would call you, like, ‘Captain Cook trader’, or a ‘coconut’ and all that sort of stuff” (Case 3).

Such episodes often caused PLOs to question their decision-making and whether their actions were in the best interest of the community:

“It makes you feel disappointed. I don’t get angry with them, you know, you go home and you question yourself. You wonder did you do the right thing where your people are concerned” (Case 1).

**Career Opportunities**

The vast majority of PLOs interviewed (21 of the 30) raised concerns about the lack of promotional opportunities available to PLOs and the impact this was having on PLO retention. It must be stated that at time of conducting this research the QPS was undertaking an internal review of PLO role descriptions, which involved examining the issue of remuneration and career development. When the interview data was analysed using Leximancer, with the concepts “promotion” and “leaving” predefined, both co-occurred in the overall leaving theme (see Map 4).
Map 4 Leaving theme

The link between these issues was further highlighted by statements made by interviewees:

“No career path. I’m as high as I’ll ever go; I’m a Senior PLO – that’s it” (case 14).

“Very limited. Especially in the PLO structure, there is no career opportunity. Sure there are administration opportunities but as a PLO, no” (Case 5).

“I’m in the same predicament, I’ve just put my papers in to go up to senior PLO and after that it’ll be like another 2 years and 100 points and I’ll get another pay progression but that’s where it all ends. You know, there’s nothing after that. If you want to go through to the Service, yeah sure but after 7 years, that’s all you get – the senior PLO. There’s no... you know, you don’t look ahead and go, ‘I want to get this far’, whereas these guys can go right through to Inspectors and Superintendents and stuff. There’s nothing like that” (Case 1).

“There have been that many PLOs – good PLOs – that the Qld Police Service have lost because of that fact [in reference to lack of a career path]. They get to like a couple of
years and realize that this job not going anywhere, they want something better, something where they can strive to use their full potential and so they always look for somewhere else. Maybe an AO job where it has all the ranks from AO1 to AO7 or whatever. And I think before the Qld Police look at professional development, they have to put that career path in place” (Case 8).

**PLO Uniform**

The issue of the PLO uniform was not an initial focus on this research. However as the project progressed the PLO uniform was clearly an issue of concern for interviewees. Opinions of the PLO uniform were divided, with some respondents perceiving that it inhibited the PLO role, while others held both positive and negative opinions about the uniform. Indigenous PLOs in particular voiced negative opinions towards the uniform (table 6).

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<td>positive attitudes</td>
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Table 6: Positive and negative attitudes towards the PLO uniform. Note - some cases are coded twice for positive and negative attitudes.

Concern about the uniform was not anchored in an overall dislike of how the uniformed looked, but related to the way it shaped interactions with the public and contributed to role conflict. PLOs despite all appearances (i.e. the yellow epaulettes) bear QPS insignia and wear a similar coloured uniform to sworn officers. Hence they are immediately associated with the QPS and can be ascribed a status by community members that does
not accord with their roles and responsibilities (i.e. that they have similar powers as uniform police). PLOs did mention that they can be mistaken as trained police. Hence there was often the public expectation that they would intervene in situations as required by sworn police. This generated role conflict because PLOs often had to negotiate such public expectations. Explaining they had no formal police powers at times generated greater confusion on the part of members of the public about the PLO role. Also PLOs reported that they received abuse as a result of the uniform. The two quotes below are an example of how the uniform was found to impact on PLO experience:

“It’s a hindrance. I believe it is. You know, a person that’s irate, angry... we might just be walking around the corner and you know, he might see the blue uniform and he’s on the gear and going 110 miles an hour and he’ll see us and there’s no way he’s going to stop and look first to see if we’ve got the yellow epaulettes on our shirt and then stop and go, ‘wait a minute, you’re not an officer, you’re one of those people who just speak with us and help us out’. You know what I mean? And I don’t feel that non sworn-in people should be wearing a blue uniform and put in that predicament where they’re mistaken for a police officer” (Case 1).

“They’ll put us in the uniform, ok, you’ve got the police boots, the police pants, the police shirt, every things the same. We’ve got the yellow epaulettes for police liaison officers, we have no power, we don’t have, you know, police training for one year at the academy learning about police powers, legislations and laws. We do learn that, but they aren’t focused on teaching us as much as they are the QPS police. And just by putting us in the uniform, it’s hard because, I mean, when I first applied for this job, I knew what was required, I knew I had to wear it. But when I started coping the abuse, I thought, ‘what am I wearing this for? I’m not a police officer; I have no power, why are they dressing me in this?’ That’s the thing, I can walk down the road and someone yells abuse at me, I stand there and look like an idiot because I can’t arrest them and if I’m standing in a shop and someone picks on another person and I’m standing in uniform, I’m just like a civilian” (Case 16).
In some instances PLOs made professional decisions to conduct duties out of uniform. One interviewee justified this in the following way:

“Because a lot of people think it’s a shame to have a police car pull up in their driveway, especially with Indigenous people because a lot of Indigenous people have adverse contact with police and when you’re trying to assist community... especially when they’ve been visited by police for domestic violence or child safety, their fears about their kids being taken away... and just the fact that they don’t want a blue uniform walking up to their door and knocking on their door and their neighbours knowing their business. That all comes into play. And it also reassures them that I’m there to help them and I talk to them about the confidentiality of the meeting and that I’m there to support them regardless of what decision they make. It just puts them at ease too I think” (Case 3).

Despite the concerns raised about the uniform, it was ascribed an important status by interviewees who saw it as generating respect and community support:

“I have never, ever felt that the uniform has been a hindrance, There’s a lot of Murris out there that are very proud of the fact that we wear that blue uniform, you know, and the fact that they can pick us with our yellow epaulette” (Case 14).
5: Conclusion

The results above reflect the main themes that the majority of PLOs raised during interviews. There were many other issues, concerns, criticisms and experiences that PLOs reported as relevant to their roles and functions and that were regarded as pertinent to the success of the PLO program. These related to levels of input into day-to-day duties and deployment, supervisory structures, communication and support from the Cultural Advisory Unit, use of police vehicles, levels of remuneration and desire for more educational and training opportunities. These issues did vary significantly between interviewees and it was difficult to achieve consistency across interview transcripts when coding data according to these themes. Nor did they arise as concepts in the Leximancer map when using the system identified or pre-identified concept function. This is not to dismiss the importance of these issues, because for some PLOs they were significant (e.g. training opportunities), others less so. There is no doubting the fact that levels of remuneration are linked to the retention of PLOs. The aim though has been to outline the most significant and consistently raised issues so as to enhance the validity of the project results.

The data indicates that PLOs make an important contribution to the capacity of the QPS to respond to ethnically and culturally diverse communities. Their skills and knowledge and links with external community groups ensure PLOs are well placed to ensure the QPS is culturally responsive. Indigenous PLOs in particular have an important role in ensuring the QPS has capacity to respond to the unique needs of Indigenous communities. Some forms of knowledge that PLOs require could be enhanced such as their working knowledge of police powers and relevant legislation. PLOs believed that the importance of them having a working knowledge of police powers was not completely appreciated by uniform staff. This was only exacerbated by the fact that PLOs reported there was a lack of understanding on the part of uniform staff about their roles and functions. This can result in PLOs being tasked with duties that fall outside their responsibilities. It also leads to PLOs being deployed inappropriately. Such a situation
can be easily addressed by more active communication across the QPS about the PLO role and by improved monitoring of their deployment.

PLOs do face a number of work related demands and pressures unlike uniform staff. They included consistent and often persistent requests for their assistance outside of working hours, the tendency of uniform staff to defer jobs that involve contact with individuals or groups of particular ethnic or racial backgrounds to PLOs, and dilemmas raised by the perception of conflicting expectations. These demands and pressures are the unintended result of having designated liaison positions that target specific ethnic and racial groups. It creates the perception of specialisation which leads to dependency and deference on the part of uniform staff. However such specialised positions are necessary to ensure the QPS is culturally responsive. It needs to be appreciated that ethnicity and culture are important in shaping ones social identity. Likewise social identity is shaped by the organisational context in which one works (Sherif 1966; Biddle 1979). Both influence perceptions and behaviour, with individuals according certain responsibilities to each identity/role. When these clash or are regarded as incompatible role conflict can occur. This is what PLOs reported as experiencing, with them occupying two dual roles – one as a QPS PLO, the other as a member of a particular ethnic/racial group. When it comes to the issue of policing such roles are not always compatible, particularly if there is a history of strained relations between the police and the PLO’s ethnic/racial group. Fulfilling one’s responsibility to the QPS and the expectations of their community can be in tension and saw PLOs question their decision-making. This was particularly exacerbated when PLOs were criticised by community members. Solving this situation is not simply about demanding that PLOs remain objective and impartial because the influence of ethnic and racial identity are ever present in the contacts that PLOs have with the public: their roles and functions encompass and are framed by culturally based interactions. Rather solutions should be aimed at improving understanding on the part of senior police about the PLO role, educating PLOs about these dilemmas and providing support networks that provide outlets for PLOs to openly discuss such predicaments and work through possible solutions.
The PLO uniform has for some time been an issue of debate and discussion both among PLOs and within the QPS. The problems it raises for PLOs result from two main sources: one is that despite the yellow epaulettes PLOs can still be associated with sworn uniform personnel, so all the expectations and potential negative perceptions community members might have about the police are ascribed to PLOs by default. The second is the fact that PLOs do not have similar statutory powers as sworn uniform police. In some situations despite community perceptions liaison officers need to restrain their desire to assist and ensure they only act within their designated roles and responsibilities. Hence the very nature of the PLO role has these contradictions in-built and role conflict is an inevitable outcome. It is important though that the QPS allows PLOs to make judgements about when the uniform may be dispensed with, because interviewees did provide compelling reasons for such decisions. Preserving PLO discretion in these situations is clearly in the best interest of both PLOs and the overall objectives of the PLO program. Again managing and supporting PLOs is linked to overcoming these problems.

The PLO program makes an important contribution to the overall effectiveness of the QPS and is essential to ensuring the QPS is culturally responsive. It has an important role in improving the capacity of the QPS to respond to internal diversity issues (e.g. improving cultural understanding among uniform police and ensuring the QPS workforce in ethically and racial diverse), and external diversity issues relating to providing policing services that meet the unique needs of ethnically and racially diverse communities.
6: References


Murphy, K & Cherney, A (forthcoming) ‘Procedural justice, legitimacy and cooperation with the police: An empirical study of ethnic minority groups in Australia’. *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*.


