

# EDITORIAL: POLICING A LIBERAL SOCIETY

John Blundell

'A policeman's lot is now a waste of time' was the headline of a *Daily Telegraph* op-ed on Friday 20 July 2007. Written by the pseudonymous David Copperfield, the police officer who wrote the op-ed also runs the blog [www.coppersblog.blogspot.com](http://www.coppersblog.blogspot.com). It provides a chilling account of how ordinary officers are now awash with Home Office diktats. It has reached the point that they are not only stopped from doing their real job but they are also forced into making arrests for the nonsense we regularly read about in our newspapers. So even if, as he claims, patrol officers are on the beat only 25% of the time (17% and 10% are other estimates) then they are likely to be 'nicking people for owning golliwogs or calling our horses gay'. As he goes on to write: 'So we're arresting children, the perennially stupid and the generally law-abiding over ludicrous matters in order to meet targets and cover up the fact that streetwise burglars and muggers are almost guaranteed to get away scot-free'.

We have to face facts and the overarching fact on this front is that our system of policing is broken. Caught between a Home Office that wishes to govern policing by central diktat and, frankly, weak leadership at the top of many forces, the beat officer who knew and cared for his patch has disappeared. This has led to a breakdown of trust between communities and their police and to a breakdown in the flow of local knowledge from the citizen to the beat officer and then on to other departments.

Our police forces today are totally dysfunctional; they have lost the confidence of the people; they are in urgent need of resuscitation, repair and redirection.

This issue of *Economic Affairs* starts with an updated rewritten version of my 2005 paper 'Policing a Liberal Society', which appeared as Chapter 4 in *Towards a Liberal Utopia*, the volume published to celebrate the IEA's 50th anniversary. In that article I raise questions about emergency response policing; discuss the role of private burglar alarms; attack the use of cars on random patrol; argue against the constant pleas for yet more officers and debate the notion that 'the police fight crime'.

This article then goes on to discuss proven successful strategies that in one case led to a 70% decline in crime. These strategies include

decentralisation; giving officers long-term control over a particular area; and taking officers out of cars and putting them out solo on foot or cycles. Other strategies are also discussed from Broken Windows to CompStat to a policy of hiring only graduates.

Finally, these lessons from top US officers are applied to the UK. Policing is about feeling a regular known presence and a sense of trust. Officers not on the streets are not policing; officers moved from patch to patch might as well not patrol; officers in cars are cocooned and not seen; officers patrolling in pairs absorbed in each other and chit-chatting about partners, bosses, holidays and so on might as well have stayed in the station. Policing is also about information which means officers with beats who engage the community, who have long-term 'property rights' in or direct accountability for their patch and who become the transmitters of local knowledge.

In a comment on this first article, Chief Constable Sara Thornton of Thames Valley Police agrees with much of my core argument, though she has concerns about many aspects of it and, perhaps inevitably, calls for more officers. She raises interesting issues to do with accountability and responsibility to which I respond in a rejoinder.

After this first article, comment and rejoinder come three academic contributions. Firstly, Andrew Gimber takes a look at the question of 'What is Steven Levitt really saying in his work on crime?' Levitt famously raised in *Freakonomics* the impact of *Roe v. Wade* which legalised abortion in the USA exactly 18 years before crime in the big cities started to plummet. But was it that simple? In fact, Levitt's argument was much more sophisticated. Other factors such as imprisonment and the number of sworn officers were also important in reducing crime. The impact of policing strategies was found to be relatively small but difficult to measure and uncertain. This analysis of Levitt's academic work gives succour to both me and Thornton – but it certainly seems clear that even if the level of police resources was important in reducing crime in the USA those increased resources would not have been effective had they not been on the beat.

In 'CompStat, community policing and *The Science of Success*: a market-based approach to police management', Matt Holian discusses how

elements of both CompStat and community policing are consistent with parts of what Charles Koch (CEO of the largest privately held company in the USA) calls Market Based Management® in his new book *The Science of Success*. It is interesting to note that much of Holian's original thinking on applying market principles within public services such as the police and ambulance services actually predates Charles's best-selling book.

Finally on the academic front Bruce Benson puts forward a Coasian approach to drunk-driving and proposes private policing of private roads as being the best solution. Owning a house on a public street in the UK and a house on a private street in the USA I can personally attest to the very different attitudes that prevail between the two. In the USA case the state of the roads, litter, traffic, speeding and related issues are in a sense more real because we – the owners – can actually do something about them pretty quickly and easily. In the UK where there is no such private ownership it is all much more political. Because we all own the streets nobody really owns them – only political pressure, a very messy and indirect route, can improve our streets in the UK.

The symposium finishes with articles by a politician and by a top police officer. The Rt Hon. David Davis MP has been the Shadow Home Secretary for several years at a time when Home Office matters have taken up more Parliamentary time than any other issue. He points out that record spending and record numbers of officers have coincided with record levels of crime; he calls for more officers on the streets, and to achieve this he calls for less bureaucracy, less intervention,

decentralisation, more co-operation between forces and better working practices.

Paul Evans was Chief of the Boston Police Department from 1994 to 2003 during which time violent crime fell by 34%, homicides were down by 68% and burglaries were down by 40%. From 2003 to 2007 he served in the UK's Home Office as Director of the Police Standards Unit. Here he discusses how different models of funding and organisation lead to different results. Finally, he comments on the skyrocketing demand for private policing and the need for real community policing.

This very rich set of articles raises many problems but also gives some clear pointers to reform. The title of these articles, 'Policing a Liberal Society', is particularly appropriate given the centralisation and illiberal methods that are increasingly at the heart of law and order and criminal justice policy. But in this area, as in so many others, we find that as the challenges become more complex and sophisticated we have to use liberal methods to police liberal societies. There is no conflict between the growing threats to our liberty from terrorism, international organised crime and the use of liberal methods of policing. Liberal and decentralised approaches to policing, including private policing, ensure that the dispersed information that police need is best gathered and communicated to those who need it. Ensuring accountability of those made responsible for policing is a necessary part of the process of decentralisation.

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