

POLICING FOR THE PEOPLE

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Increased spending on law and order over the last decade has not been matched by reductions in crime. The government's claim to have reduced crime does not reflect reality and the public know this. The way to rebuild public confidence and tackle crime is to put more police officers back on the streets. This article argues that in order to do this, four key reforms of the police are needed: a reduction in bureaucracy and central intervention; greater accountability to local communities; more co-operation between forces; and the modernisation of working practices.

Introduction

Nothing affects people's quality of life more than crime. It damages family life and undermines whole communities. Crime and anti-social behaviour are at the top of the political agenda because they top public concerns. The tendency to believe that, if crime goes up, the police are to blame is too simplistic. We all have a responsibility for tackling the long-term causes of crime. The police cannot fight crime alone. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the police are central to any crime-fighting strategy. Today, the police find themselves thwarted by bureaucracy at nearly every turn, demoralised by meaningless targets imposed from the centre, and hampered by outdated and inflexible working practices. It is time for a fundamental review of the direction of policing in this country. We must renew the bond between the police and the communities they serve. We must trust the ability of police to exercise their professional judgment and discretion. Above all, we must free up the police to deliver a police service fit to meet the challenges of twenty-first-century Britain.

Crime is too high

Britain now spends more on law and order as a proportion of GDP than any other country. The government increased spending by an average of 5% in real terms each year between 1997 and 2005. The majority of law and order spending goes to the police who now have a total budget of over £12 billion (Home Affairs Committee, 2007, p. 6). This represents a cost of £550 a year to each household in England and Wales. As you would expect from such an injection of resources, the number of full-time police officers has increased by 12% over the past decade.¹

However, in spite of record spending and record police numbers over the past ten years, crime has increased. Crime today is almost ten times higher than 50 years ago. Using recorded crime (crimes per 100,000 of the population as a measure), crime in England and Wales has risen from 1,053 in 1950 to 10,024 in 2006–07. Almost 300,000 more crimes were recorded by the police last year than in 1998–99, and violent crime has doubled over the past decade (Home Office, 2007a, p. 42).

The government's claim that crime measured by the British Crime Survey (BCS) has fallen is undermined by the fact that the BCS covers only half of recorded crime and ignores murder, rape, fraud, crimes against children, commercial crime including shoplifting, and crime where there is no direct victim, such as drug dealing. Even according to the BCS, the government's preferred measure, violent crime increased by 5% last year (ibid.).

The substantial increases in resources have not delivered corresponding decreases in crime. As a Home Affairs Committee report recently highlighted, there is currently no comprehensive way to assess the productivity and cost effectiveness of the police service, making it difficult to draw a clear link between investment and outcome (Home Affairs Select Committee, 2007, p. 36). However, on any available measure, police impact has fallen. As police funding has increased, arrest rates have remained static and the percentage of crimes solved has fallen. Currently just one in four crimes is detected. Of the 5.43 million crimes recorded in 2006–07, the number of sanctioned detections was 1.39 million, or 26% (Home Office, 2007a, p. 174). This leaves a 'justice gap' – crimes not brought to justice – of 4 million crimes.

Taxpayers have not received value for money. So it is not surprising that fewer than half of the public think that increases in council tax to pay for

improvements to local policing have delivered value for money.² Confidence in the police has dropped, distancing them from the communities they serve.

Where are the police?

The police and the public have never been more remote from each other. Most people cannot name a single local police officer, and less than a quarter of the public think that policing in their area has improved (ibid.).

Over the past 14 years, over 800 police stations have closed.³ Today only one police station in eight is open 24 hours a day. Station closures have coincided with the police moving from foot patrols into police cars as fast response to 999 calls has been a priority. The shift away from foot patrol, as the prime method of policing, means that less than a tenth of officers are now dedicated to neighbourhood policing.

This is a mistake. The fact is that a visible police presence on the streets cuts crime. When more police were put on the streets of central London after 7/7, a 10% increase in police numbers on the streets of six London boroughs reduced crime by 3% (Draca *et al.*, 2006, p. 7). A huge majority of the British public – 83% – support a ‘zero-tolerance’ approach to all crime, with highly visible policing on the streets, clamping down heavily on anti-social behaviour like graffiti, vandalism and drunken disorder.⁴ The reduction in crime in New York City in the 1990s proved what visible policing can do. It accounted for half of the 75% reduction in crime in a decade. It can make our streets safer too. The lessons of New York are important. Better police performance was achieved through a combination of factors, including robust law enforcement, greater accountability for police performance and, critically, a significant increase in the visible police presence on the streets.

So if they are not out on patrol, where are all the new police officers we have gained over the past decade? The simple truth is that, tied up with excessive bureaucracy and red tape, vast amounts of police time is spent inside police stations. This, coupled with an inflexible workforce and inefficient procedures, means that our police are ill-equipped to rise to the twin challenges of tackling low-level crime and disorder as well as fighting serious crime and terrorism. In order for them to meet these challenges, they must be allowed to do their job properly.

In April 2007, the Conservative Police Reform Taskforce published *Policing for the People* and proposed four key reforms to improve policing in Britain. Firstly, the hands of police must be freed from bureaucracy and central intervention, so that officers can be released for front-line duties. Secondly, the police must be made properly accountable, with directly elected police

commissioners replacing the faceless police authorities which exist at present. Thirdly, the structure of the police must enable far more effective co-operation between forces than has happened in the past. Fourthly, the complexity and demands of modern policing require a professional workforce that is flexible, well trained, highly motivated and properly incentivised.

Taking the handcuffs off the police

We should remove the handcuffs from the police and let them get on with the job of cutting crime. Unfortunately, the last decade has witnessed unparalleled central intervention in our police service. As Jan Berry, Chairman of the Police Federation, recently put it: ‘As a result of Government diktats, the service has been reduced to a bureaucratic, target-chasing, points-obsessed arm of Whitehall’.⁵ The government’s desire to micromanage the police from the centre manifested itself most clearly by the creation of the Home Office Police Standards Unit in 2002, which helps police forces meet the ‘desired levels of performance’.⁶ After this came the introduction of a three-year National Policing Plan, which sets out the government’s priorities, performance indicators and plans for the police. In 2006 the government created another new national policing body, the National Policing Board, chaired by the Home Secretary, to set strategic goals for the police.

The police are now bound by five Public Service Agreements (PSAs). There are five key priorities in the National Policing Plan. The National Community Safety Plan sets out another six key priorities. There are 23 Baseline Assessments and 29 Statutory Performance Indicators. The list goes on. It is bad enough that red-tape is turning more of our police into box-ticking bureaucrats, something that they rightly resent, but the consequences are even worse than that.

Arbitrary national targets skew the performance of those officers that do make it into their neighbourhoods and communities, encouraging officers to go for easy detections of minor crimes through so-called ‘summary justice’. Take the use of Fixed Penalty Notices for Disorder – this has increased by 40% between 2004 and 2006, with fines for shoplifting increasing eight-fold.⁷ This has fostered the perception of soft justice, with offending effectively going unpunished. Whilst one in ten offences brought to justice is now a Fixed Penalty Notice, the proportion that result in a conviction in court has fallen from 68% in 2003 to 49% in 2007 (HM Chief Inspector of the Crown Prosecution Service, 2007, p. 31). We are effectively taxing shoplifting and encouraging pay-as-you-go hooliganism.

The pressure placed on police to meet targets to ‘bring to justice’ as many crimes as possible also

increases the temptation to take action in the cases of relatively trivial crimes where common sense suggests a few firm words would suffice. The Police Federation have highlighted ridiculous cases which include a man who was cautioned by police for being 'found in possession of an egg with intent to throw'; a child who was arrested in Kent for throwing cream buns at a bus; and two children in Manchester who were arrested under firearms legislation for being in possession of a plastic toy gun.⁸ Cases such as this do little to build public confidence in the police. A recent survey indicated that over 60% of the public believe that police prefer to focus on easy targets such as speeding motorists rather than tackling crime.⁹

The target-driven culture has created new layers of reporting requirements and increased the burden of bureaucracy. The requirement placed on the police to record every stop they make takes seven minutes each time. Police now spend more time on paperwork than on patrol. Just 14% of all police officers' time is spent on patrol compared with 19% of their time on paperwork.¹⁰ Only one in 58 police officers is patrolling the streets at any one time, according to Home Office figures.¹¹

The public want the police to be crime fighters, not form fillers. If the amount of time a police officer spends on the beat could be increased from one-fifth to two-fifths, this would double the police presence on our streets. That would deter many crimes, ensure a swifter response once a crime has occurred and restore public confidence. Unnecessary forms, like the 'stop and account' form, must be scrapped. The antiquated computer system should be joined up so that officers no longer have to key in details on multiple databases. The personal details of a charged person can be recorded as many as 17 times on to different forms in a police custody and case-file process. Matters are often made worse by the lack of communication and co-ordination between the IT systems of the courts, the Crown Prosecution Service and the police.

Civilian staff should be employed so that police officers can be released from tasks that sworn officers need not do. As a part-time, volunteer force, Special Constables represent an untapped resource of enormous potential. We should build upon the success of the Special Constabulary and develop a new cadre of police reservists. We can make being a police reservist an attractive option for socially responsible people who want to serve their community and make a contribution in their spare time. We could remunerate them perhaps through giving them income tax relief or a council tax rebate. We could give them enhanced opportunities for training and specialisation. Police Reserve Officers could form an integral part of neighbourhood policing teams, raising police visibility on our streets and restoring the bond of trust between the police and the public.

Targets, directives, inspection and centralisation remove the scope of the police to exercise their professional judgment and discretion. We need a fundamental reorientation of the police away from Labour's centralised 'command and control' approach towards locally accountable police commissioners. The Home Secretary's powers of intervention should be reserved for when national leadership is necessary. An independent national body should publish data and monitor performance. Force priorities should, as far as possible, be set locally. What use is a national PSA target to cut burglary if burglary is a problem in some communities but not others? Police chiefs should be given the freedom to manage their forces and be held accountable for their performance to the local community they serve.

Greater local accountability: giving local people a say

The public's demand for greater local accountability is clear. We need to give local people a say. In an ICM poll for Policy Exchange in 2002, an overwhelming 80% of respondents said that they would like to have more input into the priorities set for local public services. Another ICM survey in March 2007 found that 89% of people felt that their local police force should be answerable to the community for the force's performance in tackling crime.¹² The police should be made more accountable to local communities at every level.

The public could be given a right of access to their local police through regular meetings with local officers, as well as access to more detailed information about crime in their area. Many forces in England and Wales already hold regular meetings with local communities at neighbourhood level but this is discretionary and is often not a priority. Regular meetings help the police to identify the public's priorities and also help build relationships with communities where there may be a need to restore confidence and trust.

At a local command level, the process of devolving power, budgetary control and responsibility to Basic Command Unit commanders should continue. However, it is at force level, where strategic and resource decisions are made, that accountability should be focused. The Conservatives have proposed that directly elected police commissioners, to whom chief constables would be accountable, should replace police authorities. The experience of cities such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and Boston, where improvements to policing have been driven by elected mayors and their appointed chiefs, makes a strong case for a single point of accountability. Alongside enhanced local accountability, we need far simpler measurement of police performance, based primarily on crime reduction, not how well forces

are meeting targets. This will involve promoting a new culture of openness about local crime statistics. People are not that interested in crime in their county but they are interested in crime in their council ward and in their neighbourhood. Local crime figures will focus the minds of both police and public on what needs to be done to tackle crime in our streets, neighbourhoods, villages and towns. Local communities would be responsible for local policing priorities. It would transform the relationship between the police forces and their communities.

Greater co-operation between forces

Giving police officers more discretion and local accountability is only part of the story. There is potential for greater collaboration between the 43 police forces.

Whilst the Home Office has sought to interfere far too much in the detailed management of local forces, it has largely failed to encourage collaboration in vital areas. The pooling of resources for certain functions, such as corporate and protective services, would enable forces to retain their local identity and accountability whilst achieving the economies of scale inherent in a merger. The Association of Police Authorities has also argued that sharing services is more likely to encourage innovative thinking than conventional mergers which result in the creation of larger versions of the existing authorities.

Sussex and Surrey police forces are already in the advanced stages of negotiating an agreement to create a central pool of officers to provide protective services such as roads policing and a murder unit for both forces. The East Midlands Special Operations Unit was established in 2006 in order to develop protective services in Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire and Nottinghamshire. These examples, and the creation of regional counterterrorist units, show that collaboration can be achieved.

Modernising the police

The world is changing, and no organisation can be immune from that. The complexity and demands of modern policing require a professional workforce that is flexible, well-trained and highly motivated. Put plainly, current workforce practices hold the police back.

Police officers are relatively well paid. That is a proper reflection of the value which society places on them and of the nature of their work, which is demanding and sometimes dangerous. At the moment, police pay is bound to seniority and length of service, rather than skills, competence and performance. This system does not adequately reward good performance, especially amongst the

lower ranks. Pay should reflect performance and skills, not just time served.

There must also be greater flexibility in police recruitment. Scientific and technological advances will mean that, increasingly, we will need to recruit professional experts who are now crucial in the fight against crime and terrorism. Currently the need to serve two years as a probationer at the bottom of the pay scale is a high barrier to entry to the police for many people. We should encourage talented people to enter directly into police ranks from other professions.

There are wider concerns that current training opportunities are unsatisfactory, particularly at higher ranks. In 2002–03, 94% of police training was delivered to constables and sergeants, with just over 1% being delivered to superintendents and above (Bolton, 2005, p. 38). Police in management roles are neither given the career development nor staff training that leaders in other public services have come to expect. A new senior staff college similar to those in the armed forces should be part of a new career development structure. The police service must be able to provide the continual training and career development which a highly motivated force requires.

Conclusion

We all want to see a safer society. Achieving it is a shared responsibility. Unless we have the courage and the determination to deliver police reform, we will not build the safer communities we want.

The plans for police reform that I have outlined have, at their heart, a commitment to bring common sense back to policing. Vigorous and visible policing should be brought back, to cut crime and make neighbourhoods feel safe again. The police should be made accountable to local communities for reducing crime. Above all, the bond of trust between the police and the public they serve must be rebuilt.

1. Home Office, various years, *Police Service Strength in England and Wales*: for example see Home Office (2007b).
2. ICM, Police Reform Survey, 2–4 March 2007, on behalf of the TaxPayers' Alliance.
3. *Daily Telegraph*, '900 Police Stations Shut Up Shop', 13 December 2006.
4. Reform, www.reform.co.uk.
5. Speech to Police Federation Annual Conference, 16 May 2007.
6. Home Office, www.homeoffice.gov.uk.
7. House of Commons debate, *Hansard*, 18 December 2006, Col. 1670W.
8. Jan Berry, Speech to Police Federation Annual Conference, 15 May 2007.
9. ICM, Police Reform Survey, 2–4 March 2007, prepared on behalf of the TaxPayers' Alliance.
10. House of Commons debate, *Hansard*, 6 March 2007, Col. 1930W.
11. *Daily Telegraph*, 17 March 2006.
12. ICM, Police Reform Survey, 2–4 March 2007, on behalf of the TaxPayers' Alliance.

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