

Police Myth-breaking

Myth 1 – “Crime has never been worse and is out of control”

Policing is a multi-faceted topic and is not, as many commentators would have us believe, solely about crime and the pursuit of offenders. In fact, less than 12% of operational police time is spent investigating or dealing with crime (CIPFA stats). Most activity relates to non-core assistance rendered to the public, dealing with mental health issues, and supporting the NHS and other emergency services. Less than 3% of time is spent on directed patrolling – the ‘bobby on the beat’ is dead and buried and has not been seen on the streets of our cities, towns, and villages for at least two decades.

In addition, contrary to received wisdom, crime is not ‘out of control’. After long-term falls seen since the mid-1990s, overall Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) crime estimates have decreased significantly in the last year. Between 1981 and 1995 levels of crime rose inexorably. From 1995 to today there has been a steady and uninterrupted reduction in the overall level of all crime. The increase in crime levels during the early 1990’s was mainly due to increases in violence, vehiclerelated theft and burglary.

Levels of crime have been broadly stable in recent years, however, the latest figures from the CSEW estimate a significant 9% reduction in the year ending March 2020 (which does not factor the impact of COVID19 lockdown which has generated an even more dramatic reduction). Underlying this were significant falls in theft (12%) and criminal damage (13%), in addition, almost all other crime types saw marked falls.

Total police-recorded crime increased by 3% for the year ending March 2020 in England and Wales (excluding Greater Manchester Police (GMP)). The difference in trend to the CSEW is because increases in total police recorded crime were largely driven by increases in high-volume offence categories including fraud and computer misuse (12%), violence against the person (7%), particularly violence without injury (9%), and stalking and harassment (12%). Trends in these offence types are better measured by the CSEW apart from fraud and computer misuse.

Taken overall however, the recording of crime is a very inexact science and senior leaders rely upon crime trends at their peril – agreeing with them when data favours their performance and disagreeing when upward movements demonstrate failure.

Thus, police recorded crime data are not a national statistic, merely a less than precise measure of the crime-related demand on the police, but not a reliable measure of all crime. In addition, for the year 2019-2020 data for Greater Manchester Police (GMP) have not been included in national figures because of issues with their data supply following the implementation of new force IT systems. Thus, any total overview of police recorded crime data for England and Wales excludes GMP – the third largest police force in the country after the Metropolitan Police and The West Midlands Police.

Trends in police-recorded crime data for the lower-volume crimes the CSEW survey does not cover, or captures less well, present a mixed picture with:

- a 4% decrease in recorded offences involving firearms
- a 6% increase in the number of offences involving knives or sharp instruments
- a 10% increase in the overall number of homicides; this includes a single incident with 39 homicide victims which, if excluded, shows a 3% increase overall

Many of these lower-volume, higher-harm types of violence tend to be concentrated in metropolitan areas such as London, the West Midlands and West Yorkshire. Whilst the total number of offences involving knives or sharp instruments in England and Wales (excluding GMP) rose by 6%, rates of increase varied across different regions. For example, there was a 7% increase in London yet a 10% decrease in West Yorkshire comprising urban centres such as Leeds, Bradford, and Wakefield, which are every bit as challenging and ethnically diverse as London boroughs. In addition, the number of homicides where a knife or sharp instrument was involved increased by 2%. This increase was largely driven by a 28% rise in London (from 67 to 86) whilst the rest of the country saw a 7% decrease in the number of homicides where a knife or a sharp instrument was used. Research has offered no reason for such disparities.

Whilst the CSEW provides the better indication of overall trends in theft offences, police-recorded crime data can help identify short-term changes in individual offences that are thought to be wellreported and relatively well-recorded by the police. Total theft offences recorded by the police decreased by 4% compared with the previous year, although these data show a varied picture with:

- a 9% decrease in burglary
- a 10% increase in theft from the person
- no change in vehicle offences

Myth 2 – “We need more police”

There are as many police officers in England and Wales in 2020 than there were in 2001, (just over 120,000), and 2001 marked the year when police numbers were at the highest they had ever been since modern policing was established in the nineteenth century. Between 2001 and the economic crash of 2007/8, the Treasury provided funding for policing on an unparalleled level and total manpower levels rose to around 140,000. However, during the period of austerity thereafter, largely through a break in recruiting, 20,000 officers were lost from the overall total bringing numbers back to their 2001 level.

As of 2012, there were 15,820 Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) in England and Wales. PCSO numbers had, like those of police constables, been falling in previous years due to austerity. At their prior peak in 2009, 16,814 PCSOs were employed. PCSOs represent 6.8% of total police employees in England and Wales. By April 2019, their numbers had fallen to 9846. When introduced in 2002 they were offered as a solution to the absence of a uniformed police presence on the streets. In truth, despite solid propaganda from the Home Office, most police leaders (in private) see PCSO's as a majestic waste of the £23,000 p.a. that each is paid on average, because they add no value to real policing and do not compensate for the absence of uniform police officers.

The simple solution to the supposed paucity of police officers, is in relation to the appalling way they are deployed and led, not in terms of manpower levels per se.

Myth 3 – “The police have good leaders who are experienced and committed”

Policing, as an occupation, is top-heavy in terms of its organisational structure, has too many levels of management, and has precious few real leaders of talent, experience, or ability. This is largely because every officer has to join as a Constable and might have to wait ten years or more to reach even junior supervisory rank as an Inspector. There are nine ranks between Constable and Chief Constable, some of which are duplications of the rank below in order to create promotion opportunities, (i.e. Chief Inspectors supervise Inspectors, Chief Superintendents supervise Superintendents, Deputy Chief Constables supervise Assistant Chief Constables). The problem of rank duplication was identified by the Sheehy Inquiry in the mid 1990's and radical change was recommended, but the government at the time, (it was the dog-days of the Major government), lost its nerve and nothing was done.

It has been long recognised that the absence of real talent, could be remedied by a radical programme of direct entry at Inspector and Superintendent rank. Indeed, there is no real reason why Chief Constables and Commissioners should not also be directly appointed from outside the service. There is precedent in terms of recruiting officers for specialisms.

In 2014 a scheme was launched to trial direct-entry appointments for Inspectors and Superintendents. Overseen by the College of Policing it had no power to direct the posting of such individuals and relied upon the goodwill of individual forces to accept the very few officers selected. The scheme was far from a success, did not receive any support from several forces, and is now suspended pending evaluation. See below:

Direct Entry Superintendents

Training started: November 2014;

Recruitment: During the evaluation period, new officers were recruited every November 2014 to 2018;

Training time: 18 months;

Training type: Intensive classroom and on the ground training; rotations through the ranks to superintendent;

Forces which recruited one or more Direct Entry Superintendents: 14 (out of 43 in England and Wales);

Cost: The cost for designing the training, recruiting the officers, marketing and carrying out the training over five years was £3.57m.

Breakdown of officers: ▪ 33 started training (November 2014-2018). As of June 2019: ▪ 25 had completed and are in post ▪ Of the 25 in post, three have become chief superintendents and one has become an Assistant Chief Constable. ▪ Four were still in training ▪ Four left the training

Direct Entry Inspectors

Training started: November 2016;

Recruitment: New officers were recruited every November from 2016 to 2018;

Training time: 24 months;

Training type: Intensive classroom and on the ground training; rotations at the every rank to inspector;

Forces which recruited one or more Direct Entry Inspectors: 21 (out of 43 in England and Wales);

Cost: The cost for designing the training, recruiting the officers, marketing and carrying out the training over three years was £2.75m.

Breakdown of officers: ▪ 54 started training (November 2016-2018). As of June 2019: ▪ 11 had completed and are in post ▪ 34 were still undergoing training ▪ Nine left the training

Conclusion

Policing is overdue for a 'nothing sacred' review. Despite claims by senior officers who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, policing is overpopulated by 'managers' and has no more than a handful of true leaders. Forces waste eye-watering sums of money on IT systems that never work and duplication of functions across the 43 forces, when the obvious solution would be to amalgamate and create a national force, (Police Scotland would be the model), or at the very least five or six large regional forces.

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