

POLICING FOR LONDON: AND “HONEST” POLICING

Summary

*The Metropolitan Police Service of London (MPS) is the largest force in the UK with about 30.000 officers. London is a complex and diverse city to police and there have been periodic difficulties with minorities. So what do Londoners think about their police, what do they want them to do and what do the police think about their work? These questions have been answered by Fitzgerald et al (2002) in a survey (hereafter PFLS for “Policing for London Study”). The data were based on a representative sample of the adult London population, case studies of three “boroughs”, interviews and statistics (British Crime Survey 2000). In general Londoners wanted a more visible and responsive police agency that was engaged with the local community. There were differences related to age and ethnic origin; but the majority **want more police but a different police**. In a diverse city there was often friction between the police and young black males (also Asians); these might be stopped and searched on the streets or controlled in their car while they often felt harassed. Yet many officers also were frustrated at their inability to respond to people`s needs and to provide the quality of service they expected. Within the police organization there was pressure to meet central targets, there was too much paper work, teams were short staffed and they were often critical of management. The MPS is highly centralised, officers are moved frequently and experienced people leave for specialised squads or to other forces. As a result **the broad thrust of the PFLS findings is that in 2000 Londoners found their police less responsive, less visible, less accessible and less engaged with the community than they would like**. The author examines the implications of this for police management and argues for “honest” policing where senior officers are clear about what they can deliver and not deliver - and do not unduly raise expectations. They also have to invest in the “primary processes”, avoid a one-sided emphasis on crime control and provide what citizens want – a visible, accessible, responsive, competent and well resourced local police.*

The Metropolitan Police Service of London (MPS) is the largest force in the UK with about 30.000 officers and 15.000 civilian personnel for around 7.5 million inhabitants; and policing the capital brings with it unusual problems. Its size and the complexity of the tasks – protecting the royal family and foreign embassies, dealing with frequent demonstrations and large sporting events, supervising major transport termini, coping with mass tourism, and tackling high crime rates including serious crime – makes it unlike most other police forces in the country. In the same way capital cities as Amsterdam, New York (effectively the “capital” city of the USA), Paris and Berlin are “different” in relation to other forces in the respective countries. Yet millions of people, from very diverse origins, live and work in London and have to be policed as ordinary citizens with local, everyday problems related to the very different areas they live in.

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Fitzgerald et al (2002) in a survey (hereafter PFLS for “Policing for London Study”). Their data can be compared with a survey from 20 years previously. But both pieces of research have to be put into context.

For in 1981 heavy-handed policing in the racially-mixed area of Brixton sparked off severe rioting. In his report on the disturbances Lord Scarman (1981) argued for a stronger emphasis on policing by the “consent” of the public and by involvement in the community. This became the orthodoxy for policing during the eighties. And in the wake of his report the Policy Studies Institute (or “PSI”; Smith: 1983) conducted a survey of the public and the police. At the time this caused a lot of consternation as there were reports of racism, sexism, poor supervision and rule-bending among officers along with a substantial minority of the population who had serious allegations of misconduct by the police (e.g. undue violence and manipulating evidence). There can be little doubt that some officers were racist in opinion and behaviour. Since then there has been a considerable effort to reduce discrimination, to recruit more police from minorities and to be more aware of policing a “diverse” population.

Then in 1993 a black youth, Stephen Lawrence, was murdered in London by an unprovoked attack by a group of young white men. Various failures in the police investigation meant that no convictions were forthcoming, although the suspects had been identified in the media, and widespread public and political dissatisfaction led to a public inquiry (Macpherson: 1997). This accused the MPS of “institutional racism”. Effectively since then the MPS has been trying to gear its policing to working with a diverse population in a “professional” manner, free of prejudice.

The PFLS allows us to look at current opinions about policing London as well as comparing that data with the original PSI findings. The data were based on a representative sample of the adult London population, weighted to contain more black and Asian respondents, case studies of three “boroughs” (local government areas which are also police districts), focus groups and interviews and some statistical material (including the London sub-sample of the 2000 British Crime Survey). What are the main findings?

Fear of crime had not substantially risen in 20 years. But anxiety was high in poor areas and Londoners of minority ethnic origin expressed more concern given the sorts of areas they lived in with high crime rates and with their fear of racial attacks. What had increased was concern with “incivilities” – street dealing and the accompanying litter of used needles, disorderly teenagers, graffiti, vandalism and accumulated rubbish. People wanted the police to **reassure them** about protection from the threat of crime and disorder.

In particular, they wanted **a more visible and responsive police agency that was positively engaged with the local community.** There were differences related to age and ethnic origin; the young and those from minorities were understandably less keen on foot patrol than others as they were more likely to be stopped. Yet the vast majority believed that the police should have powers to stop and search suspects. “Stop and search” tactics have been widely criticised as it is held that minorities tend to be prime targets for control; and resistance to them sparked off the Brixton disturbances in 1981. They did argue for stops, however, which were soundly based on grounds of reasonable suspicion; also for more attention to “others”, preferably outside of their territory, while black respondents were more resentful of being

stopped. This wide support for stop and search sounds surprising except that many respondents in poor areas are themselves likely to be victims of crime.

They want more police but a different police; officers who engage with the local community and with whom they can interact in a non-confrontational way.

Over a third of Londoners had sought some sort of help from the police in 1999-2000. More than half of this was in relation to crime but almost the same percentage had other reasons, say reporting noise or disturbances. Victims of crime were generally satisfied with the police response. But the percentages for “most satisfied” had fallen, and for “dissatisfied”, had risen in 20 years. Dissatisfaction arose from feelings that the police displayed lack of interest or too little effort; the “result” was not as important as having police who showed interest and kept you informed on your case.

A quarter of Londoners were approached by the police in that year. Generally this was in a car but also on foot; many young men under 35 had experience of being stopped by the police and this was especially true for young black males. The best demographic predictor of being stopped was young, black, single and working class. This is reminiscent of American officers who speak of “driving while black” as grounds for controlling an African American car driver. Less people were stopped than in the early eighties but more Asians were subject to control. The majority of respondents were happy with police behaviour during controls but those who were young or lived in poor areas, or from minorities, were more likely to be dissatisfied than others. A third of the sample stated that they or someone they knew were really annoyed by police conduct; the best predictor for this was being black, young, middle class and owning a car (owning a car gave a larger chance of being controlled and being middle class meant the individual was more likely to resent being selected for police attention).

Confidence in the police had fallen in 20 years; less felt they did a “very good job” and more considered that they did a bad job; but this decline has been witnessed more widely in British police forces and not just in London. The police were ranked lower in public confidence than other public services but highest within the criminal justice system. In focus groups there were strong feelings among young people, of all ethnic origins and in various areas, that police activity is biased against them. About a third of the sample thought the police treated ethnic minorities unfairly and this had risen since 1983; but most people thinking this were mostly white (minority views were fairly stable). There had been a rise in willingness to help the police while more people from minorities were prepared to consider joining the police.

Police views of areas tended to be based on a perception of how willing people were to cooperate with them. Those living in deprived, high-crime areas were seen as negative and this was compounded by the fact that calls for assistance in those areas were often confrontational. **Many officers were frustrated at their inability to respond to people’s needs and to provide the quality of service they expected.**

Within the police organization there was pressure, they lamented, to meet targets that were not very relevant to most of the local calls they answered, there was too much paper work, teams were short staffed and they were often critical of management. They felt they were in a no-win situation with different sections of the local

community who **saw them as biased in favour of other ethnic groups**. Then in contacts with minorities there was a high chance that they would immediately claim discrimination so there was even a tendency to avoid contact with these groups. Officers were often moved around London and found it difficult to adjust to the new groups they encountered in different boroughs (there is an increasing number of people from countries in the Middle East). Senior officers were caught between central demands and the needs of local residents; often they had little chance to get to know their personnel and to keep up morale and performance.

The broad thrust of the PFLS findings is that in 2000 Londoners found their police less responsive, less visible, less accessible and less engaged with the community than they would like.

In essence, nearly everyone wants more police but with a different style; and officers would like to adjust to the needs and demands of the public. So why isn't that happening?

- **crime has been falling** since the mid-nineties (except for street robberies, often recently of mobile phones); in some ways, then, the work load had not become heavier except perhaps in terms of involvement in multi-agency cooperation
- **the public's expectations had doubtless risen** as the police had positioned itself more as a service organization and with the rise of critical public sector consumerism
- **police resources had fallen** while the MPS loses many experienced officers to outside forces where the work is less hazardous and housing is cheaper
- **relentless government pressure** to abide by centrally set performance measures, with an emphasis on crime fighting, limited the capacity of the local police to react to community needs
- the MPS is also a **highly centralised organisation** which restricts local commanders' discretion in policing their own boroughs; furthermore, the crime-fighting focus and the reaction to many forms of crime led to setting up **specialised units** and this usually drew experienced personnel away from the uniformed branch
- officers in focus groups were **cynical about "management"** because the emphasis on centralisation and quantitative targets disempowered middle managers and demoralised the "front-line" workers (but it must be said that such cynicism is almost universal in police culture)
- **training was held to be inadequate** for the situations encountered on the streets of London; there was much **turnover of senior staff** who were often moved after short periods in a borough so that they could not give continuity and leadership
- all these factors accumulated to foster a **large measure of dissatisfaction among officers; they felt unsupported by their senior managers, under-rewarded and under-resourced.**

This is a sombre picture but I suspect it is true of many large, urban forces (and perhaps of many other forces as well). Policing has becoming increasingly complex

in many ways and especially in relation to the diversity in communities, particularly in certain cities. While many commentators would argue that the police should be investing in the “community relations” paradigm (or “COP”, for community oriented policing) with serious and professional attention to local needs, the British government (first under the Conservatives but just as firmly under Labour) has chosen for a crime fighting focus (Tonry: 2004). This, coupled with the emphasis on quantitative performance measures, represents an alternative, centrally imposed paradigm which limits local police discretion and undermines efforts to implement COP in the various districts.

What do the authors propose as answers? They argue for

- improved local consultation; focussing particularly on the “incivilities” that disturb people; a more visible and accessible police presence on the streets but with a clear sense of purpose and not just as symbolic “reassurance”; reinforce the capacity of officers to respond to calls with better integration of specialist and generalist work; give local managers more autonomy with increased flexibility to respond to local needs; and invest more energy in multi-agency partnerships.

It could be said that there is nothing new here and I will return to this later. But the PFLS project has two main conclusions:

Firstly, there is a **legacy of discrimination and over-policing** that overshadows relations with black people but this is related to the cycle of poverty, deprivation and high-crime rate areas where minorities tend to live; as the police focus disproportionately on the young they often get locked into adversarial and confrontational contacts with minority youth (black but increasingly Asian as well). It is crystal clear that **the police in isolation cannot achieve better relations with minorities** and this has to be a concerted effort by many agencies.

Secondly, the police cannot be effective in tackling crime unless they re-engage with the public. The use of quantitative performance measures geared to a narrow range of targets imposes short-term thinking while ignoring the interconnection between crime, disorder and incivilities; it has also drawn resources away from activities that win the trust of local people. Yet the police depend on that trust if they are to be well-informed about local patterns of crime and disorder. And they can only effectively tackle crime and disorder when local people are willing to play an active role in the identification and prosecution of those involved.

Comment

Although London can be seen as an exceptional city, I suspect that many police officers and others will recognise the dilemmas facing the police there as mirroring in some ways the problems they also encounter in other towns and regions. Here are my general reflections on the material presented by PFLS.

- What strikes one immediately is how the police organization is **wrestling with dilemmas and solutions that have been circulating for at least twenty years.** The underlying ideas of COP, and POP (for “problem oriented policing”), have been familiar since the work of Goldstein (1979) and others and

seem to be periodically rediscovered, reinvented and regurgitated. Kelling, who is associated with “zero tolerance policing” (or ZTP) in New York (even if he now denies it), calls ZTP a new paradigm of COP. COP is apparently infinitely elastic - and can fit all sizes!

- For over twenty years research has been telling us that people want a visible, approachable responsive, “local” police; and many police chiefs and politicians have been promising to deliver that “new-style” policing. What, then, hampers implementation?
- **The two major hurdles are politicians and police management.** Politicians are increasingly fixated on crime and crime reduction and make demands on the police that the police cannot deliver. Every first-year lecture on crime control informs the students that the police alone can do very little to reduce crime; but politicians continue to ignore the overwhelming evidence for this. Neo-liberal thinking with a focus on targets, ranking agencies on performance and quantification of output has amplified this one-sided governmental thrust and leads to distortion in policing.
- **Police managers are caught between the crime control model and the community involvement model.** In theory these should not be incompatible; indeed, the PFLS report, along with much other material, maintains that they are interlinked and complementary. But there are two factors which make it difficult to deliver both adequately. One is that the police organization itself is obsessed with crime control; its culture is primarily geared to catching crooks and to denigrating other efforts as “soft” and as marginal to the “core business”. And the other is that police managers are often not very good at the balancing act.
- In London you have a population that wants more and better policing and officers who want to deliver it that but the organization and management are the stumbling blocks. Too centralised, too specialised, too many organizational changes, not enough resources and senior managers who are moved constantly and are too distant and middle managers with too little power. It may be related to the huge size of the organization and the complexity of the tasks in London but there is also **an element of top management simply not being able to solve these glaring dilemmas.**

Perhaps I could try to resolve some of this by stating my own views on policing based on thirty years involvement with policing and police research. Rather than looking for some catchy label I prefer to speak of “honest policing” (see Bayley: 1994). The essence of this is to admit openly and with good arguments what you can do and can do it.

Punches Principles for “Honest” Policing:

- The police organisation is a **complex service agency** that delivers a number of services of which crime control and prevention is an important one. Its core business is ensuring safety, promoting tranquillity, combating disorder and preventing crime. In order to achieve this it has to have legitimacy and credibility among its diverse publics and this means a negotiated “policing by consent” model with citizens and others

as co-producers of safety. An over-emphasis on crime control runs the risk of destroying trust and alienating segments of the population.

- Police leaders have to be clear, consistent and unambivalent. The police organization is the only 24 hours, accessible social service and in its response to calls from the public it has a crucial support function for citizens; research consistently reinforces the point that much police work is geared to helping people and not directly to law enforcement. This needs to be acknowledged as a crucial public service.

- At the same time the police organization is a visible institution of the state which can interfere directly in the lives of citizens, deprive them of their freedom and, if necessary deprive them of their lives. On the one hand this implies serious attention to human and civil rights; but, on the other hand, it also requires being "honest" with citizens. A police chief needs to repeat; "we are a social service primarily geared to the needs of the public; but if threatened my officers may, as a last resort, use lethal violence; by disturbances of public order my officers may use appropriate force and may deprive people of their freedom; in relation to crime control it may be necessary for my officers to stop and question people who turn out to be perfectly innocent of any crime or any suspicion. These tasks are part of our mandate and will be conducted with legality, professionalism, courtesy and accountability".

- This is being honest so that the public, and the police themselves, do not confuse the vital social task of the police as being incompatible with essential and "hard" control duties.

- Honesty is also required in the delicate, intricate and prolonged negotiations that are required to generate community safety programmes. Senior officers have to deal with arousing undue expectations among diverse stakeholders and this means **spelling out what the police are prepared to do and not do**. And honesty is not promising what you cannot deliver.

- Because if we recognise that the essential cutting edge of the police is delivering services in the community then the organization has to be geared to that strategically, structurally and culturally. As with all service organizations there has to be real **investment in the primary processes**. You could say that in many contemporary police organizations there is a conspiracy precisely to undermine those primary processes.

- The police organization needs leaders who can manage and managers who can lead. Without the genuine investment by leaders from the top, who personally carry the message with conviction, not much will change. Honesty is saying to the essential front-line workers engaged in primary service delivery, and making the most important decisions in the organization, the following: "the leadership of this organization recognises the vital work that you do in delivering services to the community; we identify with those functions and will do all we can to provide adequate resources and training, to ensure continuity of personnel and supervisory staff, to coordinate your efforts with specialised units and to grant you the autonomy and discretion, within clear guidelines, needed to adapt to local needs and demands". If a chief does not really mean that, or cannot deliver on the promises, then he or she should keep quiet.

- Furthermore, that work has to be geared to what the public wants (e.g. with regard to dealing with domestic violence, fatal road accidents, and burglaries) as set out in "service delivery standards" as appraised by consumer satisfaction in a continual process of improvement.

- Finally, our enlightened chief has to be honest about governmental pressure and institutional targets; some form of pressure to achieve standards and to generate performance is healthy and appropriate; the key is **quality over quantity** and targets that are meaningful to local policing needs. But overemphasis on externally imposed quantifiable targets is fatal to motivation and to “tailor-made” local policing. That is surely one of the most significant conclusions of the PFLS report.

In essence, a great deal of research has shown that policing is largely a “social service” driven by public demand; **even in a diverse and difficult city like London people don’t want less policing; they want more policing but of a different sort.** My point has been to say – look at the evidence and look at what people want - and then do the business. We should avoid slogans, labels and sound-bites that are misleading, that promise more than they can deliver or are some very old wine in new bottles. Police chiefs should be honest, come clean and state that what they can deliver and what they cannot deliver. Policing is about safety, security, service and keeping the peace within the rule of law and with the consent and satisfaction of the public. Any politician or police chief who disagrees with me, and I cannot conceive that anyone would now dare to do so (but “go ahead punk, make my day” to quote Dirty Harry), is ignoring what thirty years of research has been telling us and which the PFLS report confirms. I can provide them with a long reading list; or they can go back to the “shop floor” and rediscover what good policing is and what citizens want – a visible, accessible, responsive, competent and well resourced local police who “belong” in the area and not strangers who are constantly shifted around. People want their “own” police who take them as citizens, and the problems in their immediate locality, seriously and who treat them with consideration, competence and courtesy. Is that too much to ask?

September 2004

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Maurice Punch studied and worked in the U.K., has worked in several countries (he has lived in the Netherlands since 1975), has researched corporate crime and various areas of policing (including corruption, reform and integrity), and has taught senior police officers. He has published in a wide range of journals in several countries and has written a number of books (including "Dirty Business: Exploring Corporate Misconduct": Sage: 1996). After twenty years in Dutch universities he became in 1999 Visiting Professor at the Mannheim Centre, London School of Economics. He has been involved in numerous conferences as presenter, organiser and chair including contributions for the Council of Europe, United Nations (Vienna) and National Institute of Justice (USA); he organized and chaired panels at the Global Forum on Fighting Corruption and Safeguarding Integrity II in The Hague and at the International Anti-Corruption Conference in Prague in 2001. He attended the "Police Use of Force" seminar at the Ruhr University of Bochum in 2004 which was hosted by Prof. Thomas Feltes and with Prof. Feltes he wrote: "Good People, Dirty Work? Wie die Polizei die Wissenschaft und Wissenschaftler die Polizei erleben und wie sich Polizeiwissenschaft entwickelt." To be published in: Monatschrift fuer Kriminologie und Strafrechtsreform, 2004/2005.

Address (home/office): Veenendaalplein 8, NL 1185 DD AMSTELVEEN, THE NETHERLANDS,
Tel.: 31 (0)20 - 641 2339, Fax : 31 (0)20 - 643 5496, E-mail: punch@xs4all.nl