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Policing is no longer a general purpose job

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# Do we need The Police?

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David Canter

Following up a murder enquiry, I was surprised to discover that the Senior Investigating Officer who had managed that case was not available. He was in charge of public order policing at the Notting Hill Carnival. It struck me that very different knowledge and skills were required for these two remarkably dissimilar roles. Yet the assumption that senior police officers can be expected to turn their hand to any of the vastly different areas that the police look after goes unchallenged. Do we still require one monolithic police force? Do we need *The Police*? Or is the range of activities in which they are involved now so varied, each area requiring such specialist knowledge, that the whole organisation and basis for our police services should be reviewed? Perhaps we should be looking for much more highly trained, much more specialist units, than one monolithic Police Force.

In the age before universal car ownership, DNA and CCTV, social networking, hundreds of mother tongues spoken in the homes of our cities, rapid developments in computing capabilities, huge databases available for examination at the click of a mouse, it may have made sense to assume that being a policeman was a general purpose task. That training in police procedures and the relevant law was all that was needed to join the thin blue line. But every aspect of policing now has become a sophisticated speciality. Indeed Google and insurance companies now have more highly developed information on people, and ways of using it, than any police force. Perhaps it is no longer possible for police officers to pick up a few technical details and understand what they are part of without a specialist intellectual basis on which to build their actions.

I suggest that the generalist approach to being a member of the police force, working your way up from being a lowly constable, without any academic training, moving through a variety of roles, is one of the main reasons for the turmoil the police are in now. If you put recent issues together it is clear that they face a very wide gamut of challenges that may not be open to a little tinkering. For example, the Crown Prosecution Service complained recently that rape cases are not being linked effectively, so that serial rapists go free. But the developments currently possible from information technology and behavioural science that would improve detectives' effectiveness are not part of the police response. I worked with the Met, at great expense to the tax payer, to develop a computer system that their own analyses proved could improve detection rates at virtually no extra cost. But this system still languishes on a desk somewhere because there is not the long-term, strategic vision to set in motion its operation. There may be local knowledge about neighbourhood villains, but a deeper understanding of the nature of serial rape and how these offenders leave virtual traces

of themselves is not available to police officers who have found their way into the rape squad because they were good at catching neighbourhood burglars.

At the other end of policing, people at the top of the Met are being castigated for having too close a relationship with the barons of the press. Their arguments that it is important to maintain good relations with the press is rather disingenuous given that all police forces have specialist press officers. When a major enquiry is underway that requires help from the public experienced public relations staff give detailed advice on how the press is to be handled. It may be that a detective can have a mutually helpful relationship with journalists in his area that does not break any rules of engagement, but when that experience is translated to the highest levels of policing the question has to be asked of whether habits learned in the lower ranks are being inappropriately translated to the highest levels.

Public order policing is another area that now has a growing academic research base. But as has been shown in a number of recent events, most notably the August 'riots', weaknesses in being able to conceptualise what is going on in any other way than what has happened before limits productive reactions. In other words, the lack of an intellectual as well as a pragmatic perspective to events limits the flexibility and resilience of those in charge.

Top-up courses at the police staff training college rarely go beyond the practicalities of police activity and are dominated by police officers sharing their experiences with those less experienced. This does mean that if, for example, a typical hostage event occurs there is a highly effective process to put in place. But if something unusual happens, like Raul Moat driving around shooting apparently at random, or crowds gathering, urged on by social media, standard procedures are not sufficient. The question then has to be asked of whether senior officers have the strategic and intellectual skills to develop novel rapid responses for new circumstances. Most of the people who move through the staff training college have no university qualifications. So, I once proposed to the head there that he should provide a general introductory course on science and social science. This was pooh-poohed as too academic, but many police forces around the world see it very differently.

In many other countries people are selected from the start to become senior police officers. There is no assumption that you will work your way up from being a bobby on the beat. In India senior officers are selected by stringent examination in which a handful is selected from thousands of applicants all of whom have good university qualifications before they are allowed to sit the entrance examination. In Portugal and Spain some police training covers the equivalent of five years at university. In Sweden police officers have to spend two years in college before they are given any authority. When I gave a course of lectures to police officers in Israel I got questioned on the sorts of technical details I would be happy for my own PhD students to raise, but then many Israeli policemen and women have Masters or Doctorate degrees.

Soldiers who join the army to play in military bands are expected to get rapid training as paramedics if they are needed in a war zone, but they are not expected to work their way up to plan major campaigns. Yet despite the rapid increase in the sophistication of every branch

of human knowledge and activity that policing connects with, police constables taking the examination to become a sergeant typically still have to master key aspects of traffic law even though they are hoping to join the squad dealing with domestic violence.

The Labour Party asked Lord Stevens to carry out an enquiry into the future of policing. The good Lord did himself work his way up from a constable catching villains on the street to the highest rank in the police, but the word is he is aware of the limits in that process and is considering something other than people pulling themselves up the ranks by their boot straps. Let's hope, for all our sakes, that he reaches even more radical conclusions.

David Canter is Professor of Psychology at The University of Huddersfield. His most recent book is *Forensic Psychology: A very short introduction*