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Research on volunteering within the police



Andrew Millie is Professor of Criminology at Edge Hill University. This research project on volunteers in policing was originally shared on the Policing and Crime Reduction Map.

Why did you conduct research on volunteers in the police?

Opportunities for volunteers are throughout the police service and can include joining the ranks of the Special Constabulary or perhaps becoming a Police Support Volunteer (PSV). The roles that PSVs undertake are diverse. For instance, the volunteers included in this study were involved in cadet leadership, Community Road Watch, early action, restorative justice, crime trend analysis, survey work, work on foreign language phone lines, administration, audit work, role play, work with vulnerable victims, supporting their local Neighbourhood Policing Team, custody visiting and holding voluntary positions on various advisory groups and panels. There are few areas of policing where volunteers cannot be involved in some way.

Despite this, there is very little research on the roles volunteers play – and this lack of research poses a

range of issues for our understanding of contemporary policing, especially at a time when police budgets have been under severe pressure. Volunteers are assumed to improve the police response to crime, to provide additional resources and to improve community engagement. However, we know little about the motivations and experiences of those who volunteer. Nor do we understand the implications for the management of volunteers and ultimately for the governance of policing. This research aimed to explore why some people volunteer for the police, issues regarding their recruitment, management and supervision and factors that might inhibit or reinforce successful outcomes.

What did the research involve?

The project involved semi-structured interviews with a sample of 25 volunteers from Lancashire Constabulary, including special constables and PSVs. The project adopted a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach in which police volunteers were actively involved in the research process. I worked alongside four PSVs in order to interview members of Lancashire's Special Constabulary and other Lancashire PSVs. The volunteer interviewers were recruited through an internal police advert and I provided them with training in interview techniques, research ethics and analysis. The result was 9 interviews with special constables and 16 with PSVs. Of the 25 interviews, 19 were conducted by the volunteer interviewers, with the remaining 6 conducted by myself. The interviews lasted a maximum of an hour each. They were recorded, transcribed and then analysed for key and emerging themes.

What are the benefits of Participatory Action Research (PAR)?

There is logic in thinking that the best people to ask questions about volunteering are volunteers themselves. They know where the interviewee is coming from and can steer the conversation based on their own 'insider' knowledge. This does not mean there isn't value in someone from outside (like myself) coming in and posing challenging questions. But the advantage of this approach is that traditional divides between researcher and subject are broken down. The research volunteers in this project found the experience to be both enjoyable and beneficial.

What did you find out?

Whilst there are clear overlaps between specials and regulars, the police volunteers involved in this study generally saw their roles as quite different to regular officers. As such, when asked about being given powers the PSVs were mostly against such an idea. Both specials and PSVs saw their role as one of support for regular officers; however, that does not mean that they consider themselves as subservient. Instead volunteers are of equal importance. They are important in providing a bridge between regulars and communities, in making the police more representative of communities, and in improving police legitimacy.

Most volunteers enjoyed what they did, and they were generally complementary about their supervision. They also had good relations with other volunteers and with regular officers. However,

some felt underused, a problem that might impact on retention.

Volunteers brought with them a range of skills that they wanted to offer the police, suggesting it is important to find out what they can do through initial skills analysis. Yet, it was also found that some volunteers wanted to do something new, something that was completely different to what they had done before. The key could be to appreciate their different motivations, informing them of opportunities but then letting the volunteers decide what they will do for the police. Some were volunteering to gain experience before applying to join the regulars (especially among the special constables that were interviewed); whilst others were motivated by wanting to do something worthwhile, to give back to the community.

It is beneficial to know more about the kind of people that choose to volunteer. A common theme the volunteers raised was the 'Golden Rule'; as one PSV put it, "I treat people, hopefully, as they would treat me". Relatedly, the theme of respect was picked up by the volunteers, alongside integrity and honesty, family, character, being non-judgemental, trying to help each other, doing the right thing, decency, kindness, giving people a voice, supporting others, accepting people and giving something back. These are the kind of characteristics sought for regular officers via the **Code of Ethics** and, in this regard, it is possible that volunteers could have a positive influence on the culture of policing. If you would like to know more about this study you can read the **full report** and **summary report** [here](#).

What other research are you conducting?

Building on this project I am currently conducting further research for Lancashire Constabulary on **The attitudes, values and beliefs of police recruits**. I am also co-editing a book with Professor Karen Bullock of University of Surrey on **The Special Constabulary**, which will be published by Routledge later in 2017.

For more information please contact Andrew directly at [**Andrew.millie@edgehill.ac.uk**](mailto:Andrew.millie@edgehill.ac.uk)

Ed Barnard, Specials Manager within the Workforce Policy and Strategy Unit at the College of Policing, explains about Citizens in Policing.

The College of Policing holds policy responsibility in a range of areas relating to special constables and police support volunteers.

Though their tasks and responsibilities differ significantly both special constables and PSVs are under the direction and control of the Chief Officer of the force where they volunteer. They are integral components of the wider Citizens in Policing portfolio, which incorporates all volunteers who support policing in either a direct or indirect capacity.

Working in partnership with the National Police Chiefs Council and engaging with a range of policing and Third Sector stakeholders, the College aims to promote the use of volunteers, who provide direct support to policing, by sharing good practice.

The citizens' role in policing continues to be as vital today as it was in the creation of the Peelian principles on which the police service was founded. Embracing and developing the 'citizens in policing' concept provides an excellent opportunity to not only increase additional capabilities, but to build social capital and ensure the service continues to successfully police with our communities' consent.

Our **Citizens in Policing** webpages provide both forces and individuals with relevant information and a basic framework for volunteering in the police service. They incorporate examples of good practice and learning from forces with established programmes of volunteer activity, which add appreciable value to forces' delivery of effective policing and community engagement.

For more information please contact Ed directly at ed.barnard@college.pnn.police.uk