

WHAT ARE THE POLICE FOR? RE-THINKING POLICING POST-AUSTERITY

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Introduction

In the context of the global financial crisis and after inheriting a record budget deficit, the British Coalition government decided in 2010 that the best way forward was a programme of austerity. What followed were major cuts to public expenditure, including a substantial reduction in police budgets. Whether this was the right decision is beyond the remit of this chapter. However, the effect on the police has been substantial. The police in Britain had enjoyed a sustained period of growth – both in terms of police numbers and increased responsibilities undertaken by police personnel – despite increases in competition and falls in recorded crime (Millie and Bullock, 2012; Millie, 2013). This was to change. In Scotland cuts came through the merging of all eight forces into a single Police Service of Scotland (Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012)¹. With the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review (HM Treasury, 2010) government funding of the police in England and Wales was reduced by 20 percent through to 2015. The scale of these cuts was unprecedented and has required police services to reconsider their priorities. At the same time the police have had to deal with major change in governance structures with the introduction of elected Police and Crime Commissioners in November 2012 – albeit following an election where only 15 percent of the electorate turned up to vote (Rogers and Burn-Murdoch, 2012). The new policing landscape of fewer resources and (assumed) greater democratic accountability has generated a lot of uncertainty among serving police officers and questions over what form policing will take post-austerity.

In this context the question of what the police are for becomes pertinent and is the focus for this chapter. According to the current Home Secretary, Theresa May (2011a), the police's remit is simple: "We need them to be the tough, no-nonsense crime-fighters they signed up to become." Yet fifty years of police research has painted a picture that is far more complicated. According to McLaughlin (2007: 52):

Despite the central position of this 'cops and robbers' model in both police culture and the popular imagination, ethnographic researchers confirmed that the exact nature and scope of police activity is in fact difficult to define and, for the most part, unrelated to law enforcement and criminal detection.

According to Jean-Paul Brodeur (1983, 2010) the policing task can be divided between 'high policing' and 'low policing'. High policing is associated with the work of the intelligence community, whereas low policing is the domain of everyday (often uniformed) officers. This

¹ see, for instance, the contribution to this volume by Nick Fyfe

chapter is concerned with the activities of low policing which are conceptualised as being on a continuum between ‘wide policing’ and ‘narrow policing’ (Millie, 2013). A focus on ‘cops and robbers’ - or Theresa May’s notion of ‘non-nonsense crime-fighters’ - may be too narrow a definition of policing. At the other extreme, Egon Bittner (1990/2005: 150) noted the police’s role as intervening in “every kind of emergency”. Police officers clearly do not intervene in “every kind of emergency”; however their remit has grown to such an extent that what is regarded as legitimate police activity is perhaps too wide. Contemporary policing activities include crime fighting, crime reduction, dealing with anti-social behaviour, tackling terrorism, public reassurance, traffic duties, immigration control, schools work, offender management, event security, disaster management, making people feel safer and so on. A narrowing of focus may be beneficial and the current cuts may provide the opportunity for this to occur with the possibility that post-austerity policing will be both slimmer and fitter.

What are the police for?

As noted, there is more to policing than fighting crime – however, fighting crime is clearly a significant aspect to police work; but it is only one aspect. If policing were to be defined narrowly along the lines of Theresa May’s ‘no-nonsense crime-fighters’ then a lot of valuable police activity would be called into question. Politically attractive ‘bobbies on the beat’ would be the first to go. While visible patrols can assist with gaining local intelligence, they rarely deal with actual crime (Kelling et al., 1974; Clarke and Hough, 1984). On a micro level visible patrol might deter criminal activity (Ratcliffe et al., 2011), yet these crimes can simply be displaced elsewhere. For Wakefield (2007: 343), the value of visible foot patrol is that it reflects “the symbolic function of policing as a sign of social order”. For Innes (2004) the visible officer acts as a signal of control. The value of visible patrol is not in terms of crime fighting potential, but in reassuring the public that the police are there, are on the side of the public and will intervene if required. Such reassurance policing (Innes and Fielding, 2002; Millie and Herrington, 2005) can be seen as part of the police’s social service function (e.g. Morgan and Newburn, 1997; McLaughlin, 2007), or as Punch (1979) once termed it, a secret social service function. The aims of reassurance policing have included improving quality of life and feelings of safety, and addressing fears of crime (Tuffin et al., 2006).

By targeting such ‘softer’ issues the hope is to improve public satisfaction and confidence in the police. Of course, this would only be possible if *all* officers - including response and investigative teams - took public reassurance seriously, rather than just those tasked with ‘reassurance’ (Millie and Herrington, 2005). Mistreatment by response teams or high profile cases of misconduct or corruption can have greater influence on public confidence. From recent history the cases of Stephen Lawrence (Foster et al., 2005) and Ian Tomlinson (Greer and McLaughlin, 2012), the Hillsborough Independent Panel (2012) and the Leveson inquiry into press standards (2012) will all have a negative influence on the public image of the police that attempts at reassurance would have to counter. Theresa May (2011b) has commented that: “I haven’t asked the police to be social workers ... I’ve told them to cut crime”. Cutting crime is important, but a focus on crime without considering the police’s wider social service function can result in very bad practice. It is Packer’s classic (1968) distinction between a crime control and due process model of justice – between getting things done and getting things done properly. True policing requires both. Similarly, there have been historic debates concerning whether the police are a force or a service (e.g. Avery, 1981; Reiner, 2013). The answer is that the police are both force *and* service.

An order maintenance role has also been recognised alongside the police’s crime control and social service functions. In fact, according to Reiner (2013: *forthcoming*):

Most police work is neither social service nor law enforcement, but order maintenance - the settlement of conflicts, potentially crimes, by means other than formal law enforcement.

According to Banton (1964) this is the function of being a 'peace officer'. For Ericson (1982) the police's function is the reproduction of order: "Their sense of order and the order they seek to reproduce is that of the status quo" (Ericson, 1982: 7). In Britain this is reflected in the requirement to 'maintain the Queen's peace'. The order maintenance function is therefore conservative, reproducing order acceptable to those with power. There is clearly negative potential with such an approach, with those who challenge the status quo being seen as opposed to a conservative order and then disproportionately policed. For Brogden and Ellison (2013: 9) "state policing has always been committed to maintaining a divisive social order" and certain 'usual suspect' groups - young Black males in particular - disproportionately targeted by police action. But preserving social order is not all bad and according to Reiner (2012: 5), "the crucial work of policing is maintaining order, on both the grand social scale and micro-social levels." For Reiner (2012) order maintenance is not inherently divisive but a function akin to what he calls 'fire brigade policing' or 'first aid order maintenance'.

In summary, the policing task is wider than Theresa May's 'non-nonsense crime-fighters' including a combination of crime control, social service and order maintenance functions. However, if these functions are defined too widely, then the police start to adopt roles more suitable for other agencies, community groups or volunteers. Reiner has noted elsewhere that "good policing may help preserve social order: it cannot produce it. Yet increasingly that is what is being demanded of the police" (2000: xi). An emphasis on order preservation rather than order production is helpful for understanding the role of the police. Order production is for others such as parents and schools who have roles in producing orderly citizens (although, of course, also citizens that challenge the status quo). The police's role is different, in preserving the existing order. Yet, as Reiner notes, the police have increasingly been required to produce order. Areas where the police roles have been stretched perhaps too widely - including in the production of order - are considered next.

How did the police become so wide?

A wide definition of policing is not new. According to Lee (1901, cited in Banton, 1973:19) the nineteenth century police officer was also responsible for "the compulsory education of children, the reformation of criminals, the observance of sanitary and hygienic conditions, the control of liquor traffic, and the prevention of cruelty to children and animals". Many of these tasks were passed onto other agencies; however, others were added to the police remit such that, by the 1990s the Conservative government attempted to lighten the load – albeit unsuccessfully (Wilson et al., 2001). Tasks that were suggested as superfluous included missing persons, schools work, noise nuisance, event stewarding, court summons, court security, immigration and certain traffic duties (Millie, 2013). Some activities have since moved to other agencies, for instance, with local authorities taking over noise nuisance, private security being used for court work and Highways Agency Traffic Officers taking on some traffic duties.

Despite such developments, over time many responsibilities have been added to the police task, either by government or through processes of empire building. The question is why this might be the case. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century 'risk' became a prevailing approach to social policy (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1999). Drawing on actuarial

work in the insurance industry it was the idea that future hazards could be planned for and prevented. As Giddens pointed out (1999: 3), it was not that the world had become “more hazardous”; rather, society was “increasingly preoccupied with the future (and also with safety)”. In this context it made sense for the police to have greater involvement in wider aspects of social policy. For instance, if a young person’s engagement with schooling reduced the risk of following a career into anti-social and criminal behaviour, then it was logical to view education in terms of crime prevention, and thereby an activity that may fall within the remit of police involvement. With the Safer School Partnerships - that evolved from the 2002 Street Crime Initiative - this is what occurred (Briers and Dickmann, 2011). Drawing on US practice (Simon, 2007), police officers were routinely stationed within school premises to deal with student behaviour and to provide a permanent link between the school and police. In effect, discipline issues that were traditionally dealt with by the school became the concern of the police, in a form of criminalisation of education policy (Millie and Moore, 2011). According to the Police Foundation (2011: 08) the role of officers within schools also expanded, “to encompass identification of risk factors pointing towards future bad behaviour or extremism”. The Police Foundation also noted that, “This area should be approached with caution” (2011: 08).

A risk paradigm was similarly used for what has become known as offender management – work traditionally carried out by probation and social workers but now also by police officers in what Kemshall and Maguire (2001) have called the ‘policification’ of probation. It was thought that future offending could be risk-managed. Police officers have worked as ‘offender managers’ as part of the Prolific and other Priority Offender Strategy (PPO) (Millie and Erol, 2006) and through Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPAs) (Kemshall et al., 2005). Individual officers may have the skills to fulfil these roles; however the involvement of the police changes fundamentally the relationship between supervisor and offender. Alongside support for the offender, the police’s role is intelligence gathering, a function that may be at odds with building trust.

The examples of police officers working within schools and as ‘offender managers’ are reflective of Jonathan Simon’s ‘governing through crime’ meta-narrative (2007) - with tackling or preventing crime regarded as justifications for a wide range of state policies. If crime prevention is an overriding consideration then schooling is important because educated children are less likely to be criminals (as much as going to school improves their life chances). Similarly, effective offender supervision becomes important because it reduces crime (as well as assists with the rehabilitation process). Such change in emphasis has alternatively been seen as the criminalisation of social policy (Crawford, 1997). If police officers become *less* involved in such activities - leaving school discipline to educators and offender supervision to probation workers² - then there is the prospect for the decriminalisation of aspects of social policy.

Other areas characteristic of wide policing and the ‘policification’/criminalisation of social policy include disaster management, immigration control and event security (Millie, 2013). In these areas too, the risk paradigm has been influential. For instance, the police’s role in disaster management is in coordination of response, crowd control, riot prevention, family liaison and investigation. It is arguable whether the police are best suited for coordination, and whether this is a task more suited to the fire and rescue service. Similarly, others may be better placed for family liaison work. This is a task where the police’s social service and crime fighting functions can come into conflict. With a focus on minimising

²To further complicate the picture, in January 2013 the coalition’s Justice Secretary, Chris Grayling, announced greater involvement of the private and voluntary sector in probation provision.

future risks, all police tasks are an opportunity for intelligence gathering. According to Davis (2012: 12):

Police regard survivors', relatives' or witnesses' disclosures to partner agencies as potential evidence and/or intelligence and argue that there can be 'no absolute guarantee of confidentiality' ... The idea of 'covert' use of a family liaison 'cover' by anti-terrorism officers has raised debate among police themselves.

The result of such an approach is that those seen by the police as 'suspect communities' (cf. Hillyard, 1993) may not wish to help the police or will not seek the assistance of family liaison.

A focus on risk has led to an expansion of policing responsibilities in other areas, even where such expansion causes conflict between these roles and traditional intelligence gathering. The police are actively involved in immigration control (Weber and Bowling, 2004; Cooper, 2009), working alongside the UK Border Agency. With a focus on controlling future risks, those seeking immigration or asylum can be seen primarily as potential criminals or terrorists. Controlling crime and terrorism are clearly important, but should only be part of immigration/asylum policy and not necessarily the defining characteristic.

Event security is also an example of wide policing that might be better suited to other providers. Potential conflict between crime control, order maintenance and social service functions was made clear in the report of the Hillsborough Independent Panel (2012: 8) which noted that during the Hillsborough football disaster of 1989 the police prioritized "crowd control over crowd safety". However, more recently the failure of private security firm G4S to provide adequate security personnel for the London 2012 Olympics (BBC Online, 2012) shows that private provision may not be the answer either.

The core policing task

If policing has become too wide then what should constitute the core policing task? This chapter has demonstrated that the policing task comprises a mix of crime control, social service and order maintenance functions. Yet how these functions have been defined has been stretched to include activities that may be better suited to other agencies. With a focus on risk, the police have become involved in activities such as schools work, probation, event security, immigration control and disaster management. There is scope for less police involvement in all these activities, leading to the decriminalisation of areas social policy. This chapter argues for a narrower definition of crime control, social service and order maintenance. For instance, within crime control is the job of crime prevention. A narrow conception of crime prevention would include crime prevention advice working with young people, schools, businesses and community groups. A wide definition of crime prevention would, for example, include being stationed within schools to reduce future crime risks, immigration control to prevent terrorism and work with offenders to prevent reoffending.

Writing in the 1960s Michael Banton observed: 'A cardinal principle for the understanding of police organization and activity is that the police are only one among many agencies of social control' (1964: 1). As I have stated elsewhere, "In simple terms, the police do not have to be doing everything" (Millie, 2013, *forthcoming*). As noted, the experience of G4S at the London Olympics shows that outsourcing to private companies might not be the best alternative. However, there are other agencies, community groups and volunteers that are capable of fulfilling such roles.

In talk of budget cuts, rather than narrowing definitions of crime control, social service and order maintenance, policing policy and practice has instead focused on protecting the ‘front line’ (HMIC, 2011; 2012; Travis, 2012). Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Policing attempted to define ‘front line’ police work, although found this more difficult than anticipated. According to HMIC (2011: 6), front line policing includes “those who are in everyday contact with the public and who directly intervene to keep people safe and enforce the law”. ‘Everyday contact’ is seen to include both visible and specialist roles, as well as middle office roles such as custody and call handling – in other words, just about everything except for back office functions such as finance and police training. Following the examples of criminalisation/‘policification’ outlined above, this definition of the front line becomes even wider.

Using the HMIC definition it was estimated that 68 per cent of police employees in England and Wales were ‘front line’ (61 per cent in visible and specialist roles and 7 per cent in middle office roles) (HMIC, 2011). According to Nick Herbert MP - who until the September 2012 Cabinet reshuffle was the Police and Criminal Justice Minister - frontline policing “includes neighbourhood policing, response policing and criminal investigation” (Herbert, 2011). This is perhaps as unhelpful as the HMIC definition. Yet, a large proportion of ‘front line’ policing is in the form of neighbourhood policing. The populist politics of the last twenty years have repeatedly led to calls for more ‘bobbies on the beat’ (Loader, 2006; Millie, 2008). As a result, by 2008 the Neighbourhood Policing Programme in England and Wales consisted of approximately 13,000 police officers and 16,000 Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) working in dedicated neighbourhood policing teams (HMIC, 2008: 4).

Being such an all-inclusive definition, ‘front line’ is not helpful in identifying what constitutes the core policing task. Furthermore, it would be a mistake to suggest that back office functions are less important as without them the so-called front line will be less effective – be they neighbourhood, response or investigative officers. Yet in a time of austerity the temptation is to cut the back office first. According to HMIC (2012: 30), “forces currently plan to reduce frontline workforce numbers by 6% (8,100) and non-frontline workforce numbers by 33% (20,300) between March 2010 and March 2015”. Such back-office cuts may be short-sighted.

Another area facing cuts has been the police estate (Millie, 2012) – representing both front-line and back office policing. For instance, Essex police planned to close 21 stations and Lancashire Police were to close 14 stations during 2012 (BBC Online, 2011a; 2011b). According to Surrey Police, 13 stations were to close to “ensure an extra 200 frontline police officers” (BBC Online, 2011c). While not all stations could be said to be a reassuring presence in the community (Millie, 2012), the closure of stations shows a lack of interest in particular neighbourhoods, thereby affecting public confidence. For instance, in the context of the Metropolitan Police’s estate strategy, according to McLaughlin (2008: 273), “the police seem to be incapable of understanding that local communities are reacting so angrily because the closures are symptomatic of a wider pattern of state withdrawal”.

Conclusions: The shape of policing post-austerity

As things stand, post-austerity policing will be characterised by - as much as possible - a preserved ‘front-line’. Elected Police and Crime Commissioners will not want to be seen to cut the front-line. However, having front-line policing defined so widely there is the prospect that police resources will have been stretched almost to breaking point. Cuts in personnel are inevitable and with recruitment freezes police forces are already shrinking. Forces are

currently promoting the use of volunteers across many aspects of their work in an attempt to fill gaps as they arise.

So-called back-room functions and the police estate are facing more substantial cuts. In the current economic climate, police buildings may also be sold too cheaply. A lot could be learned from Harold Macmillan's (1985) famous 'selling the family silver' speech in relation to the Conservative government's privatisation programme (see Daily Telegraph, 2008). By selling so many stations the police may be selling some of its more prized assets in an attempt to shore up short-term funding of the so-called 'front-line'. Longer-term impacts may be more serious.

Instead, a narrowing of the front-line and a narrowing of the police task in general are required for the creation of a post-austerity policing that is both slimmer and fitter. Tasks that could be passed onto other agencies, community groups and volunteers have been highlighted, although it is acknowledged that they will have similar economic pressures and may not be able to pick up the slack completely. Government leadership would be required for tasks to be passed elsewhere. The benefit of less police involvement in such 'wide policing' activities will be the decriminalisation of aspects of social policy and the lessening of conflict, for instance, between support and intelligence gathering at disaster scenes, between crowd control and crowd safety at sports events, and between identification of risk factors for potential crime and terrorism and working to improve the education chances of children in schools.

Further areas where police activity could be transferred elsewhere include traffic duties. As noted, some traffic duties have been taken on by Highways Agency Traffic Officers. Providing there is political, legislative and popular support, further enforcement responsibilities could be passed to the Highways Agency, leaving the police to focus on its new narrower front-line.

As for what should be left for the police, the answer is not a shrinking of responsibility to Theresa May's notion of no-nonsense crime-fighters. Instead there needs to be a return to the fundamental roles of the police – these being crime control *and* social service *and* order maintenance:

- If the police's crime control function is defined too widely, then it includes tasks that perhaps ought to be decriminalised and undertaken by others. For instance, in terms of crime prevention, a narrow focus would include work with young people, schools, businesses and community groups, but not necessarily having officers permanently stationed within schools, permanent police involvement in immigration control to prevent terrorism or full-time police taking on probation duties to prevent reoffending.
- A clear social service function for the police is public reassurance with the aim to improve public confidence and legitimacy for policing decisions. If the police's social service role is defined too widely, then it includes activities that may be better suited to others, such as work in disaster management or probation where priority should be social welfare rather than intelligence gathering.
- As for the police's order maintenance function, an important test is Reiner's (2000) distinction between preserving social order and producing social order. If a task is focused on order production (such as education), then perhaps it could be passed onto others more suited to the task, leaving the police to focus on preserving order. The priority for work within schools, for example, then shifts to improving educational chances rather than identification of risk factors for future anti-social behaviour, crime or terrorist extremism.

It is a question of what should be the focus of police work. Despite the current uncertainty associated with austerity, there is now an opportunity to rethink the shape of policing and thus create a leaner and fitter post-austerity police. Unfortunately, the populist politics that are associated with policing dictate that, rather than having an intelligent debate concerning the nature of the policing task, we have a simplistic idea that ‘front-line’ policing should be protected at all costs – and that this front-line is defined so widely that it is inclusive of all policing activity, bar some back room functions. How the newly elected Police and Crime Commissioners are going to react to the current fiscal challenges is not yet certain; however, they may not be willing to negatively impact the strength of the front-line – no matter how widely this front-line is defined.

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