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Local Policing and Police Reform in Scotland: some initial research findings

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Background

Following the decision to create a national police service for Scotland, SIPR has focused on developing a range of research projects aimed at yielding insights into the implementation and impacts of police reform. These projects[1] are at different stages in terms of data collection and analysis, therefore this report draws on findings from just one of these, a national survey focusing on awareness of police reform and levels of confidence in local policing. This was jointly conducted with ScotCen Social Research as part of the highly regarded annual Scottish Social Attitudes survey, and was initiated in 2012 (to establish a baseline) and repeated in 2013 with plans for further surveys in 2014 and 2015. The survey therefore provides the opportunity to track changing understanding and perceptions of policing across Scotland.

Key findings from the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2012 and 2013

Headline findings from the 2012 & 2013 surveys include:

Most people do not understand how policing is organised, though there are some signs that this is improving with the launch of the single force. At the time the 2012 survey was conducted, slightly fewer than half those interviewed understood the structure of policing in Scotland. This did not seem to be the result of confusion about the forthcoming reforms – in fact, only 6% at that point believed that there was a single force. More striking was the finding that 42% simply did not know how policing was then organised. A year on, the proportion understanding the current arrangements remains at around a half, but there are some grounds for optimism that the new arrangements are easier for people to understand. Only 13% believe there now to be 8 regional forces and there is evidence of a slight reduction in the proportion indicating that they simply do not know how policing is organised (2013 : 35%).

That said, when asked specifically about the introduction of a single force, a majority of those interviewed indicated that they had either heard nothing about it (28%) or had heard something but knew nothing about what it involved (26%). The number of people indicating that they had heard, and knew a lot about it had doubled, but was still very low at 9%.

Awareness and understanding of policing is strongly patterned by social class and education. Key predictors of awareness and understanding include social class, level of education and newspaper readership. There is also a gender effect with men more likely to exhibit higher levels of awareness and understanding of the new arrangements.

Local policing is fairly visible, though there are marked variations according to both individual characteristics and area type. In 2012, the survey included a measure of the visibility of local policing. That indicated that most people then saw the police in their area with a relatively high degree of frequency – around half doing so at least once a week. A quarter of people said that they saw the police less than once a month (16%) or not at all (8%).

Variations in response to this question partly reflected differences in the ways in which particular groups use public space – younger people, for example, are more likely than older people to report seeing the police frequently. But there were also some clear areas effects – not only between areas of higher and lower deprivation, but also according to degrees of rurality. Those living in the most derived areas were almost twice as likely (61%) to see the police as those in the least deprived areas (34%)

Certain groups are markedly less willing to contact the police to discuss problems in their area. The 2012 survey also included some questions aimed at gauging people's willingness to contact the police in their area to discuss issues that might be bothering them about how the area is policed. Overall, those less willing to contact the police tended to be in the youngest age group, have lower levels of educational attainment and be living in areas of greater deprivation.

The growth of social media offers a potentially important new channel between young people and the police. Although young people in general were much less likely to indicate that they would contact the police, at least using traditional methods, those under 35 were the group *most* likely to indicate that they would be likely to contact the police using social media – suggesting that such channels are not only likely to become extremely important but that they may offer an opportunity to reach groups who are traditionally reluctant to engage with the police.

Most people agree that the police have a good understanding of the problems faced by local people, but there is also evidence of a demand for greater engagement. Around 6 in 10 agreed in both 2012 and 2013 that the police have a good understanding of local problems, but a larger majority (75% in 2012 and 71% in 2013) also agreed that the police should do more to find out what people think about how the area is policed. Responses to both of these statements were also strongly patterned by age and deprivation.

Table 1. Confidence in local policing/engagement

% agreeing or agreeing strongly	2012	2013
The police in this area have a good understanding of the problems faced by local people	59	57
The police should do more to find out what people around here think about the way the local area is policed	75	71

Source: 2012 and 2013 Scottish Social Attitudes surveys

There is little evidence so far that having a single force has made people feel more confident about how their area is policed. In both 2012 and 2013, the largest single group thought that having a single force would make no difference to how their area is policed and, of the remainder, a greater number of people said they felt less than more confident as a result of the reforms.

Table 2. Whether having a single national police force for Scotland makes people more or less confident about local policing

	2012	2013
	%	%
Much more confident	3	3
A little more confident	7	9
Will make no difference	44	52
A little less confident	26	22
Much less confident	16	11
(Don't know)	4	3
Sample size	*1,229*	*1,497*

Conclusions

The evidence presented here is a snap shot of a complex and developing landscape of relationships, perceptions and experiences following the most fundamental change to the organization of policing in Scotland in well over a hundred years. At this early stage in the implementation of reform, there appear to be no significant changes in public attitudes towards policing and only around half of those surveyed were even aware that Scotland now has a national police force.

Evidence from more qualitative research being conducted by SIPR which is still in progress[1] does indicate, however, that those directly involved in the delivery and scrutiny of policing at a local level do perceive that reform has brought with it important changes in style and approach. Some of the most significant changes have been experienced by local authorities who, having lost their pre-reform statutory responsibilities for policing, now see themselves in a weaker position to influence what happens locally and are still in the process of trying to develop a new role for themselves focused around local scrutiny and engagement, particularly in relation to the production of local police plans.

For the police at a local level, the introduction of new approaches to the management of policing (with an emphasis on performance related targets and key performance indicators) has brought with it perceptions of a stronger focus on enforcement and less emphasis on issues of prevention and partnership. The relationship between centrally and locally determined policing priorities also appears to be emerging as an important issue. In some areas national and local priorities appear to be closely aligned while in other areas there are perceived tensions between what is seen as a national agenda focused on crimes of violence and more local concerns about other types of criminality such as property crime. As further research evidence is gathered it will be possible to provide a more detailed and nuanced picture of how relationships between national and local priorities are being addressed and how police reform is being experienced at a local level.

[1] These projects include:

A three year project on the theme of 'Local Policing in Transition' in collaboration with Police Scotland and funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council, which examines the impact of police reform from the perspectives of local police officers, community organisations and councillors.

Research to examine the views and perceptions of local divisional commanders, other senior officers on staff and rank-and-file officers regarding the early impacts of police reform;

International comparative research with colleagues in northern and Western Europe on police reform, including specific work with the Netherlands which, like Scotland, introduced a national police force in 2013 to replace regional police forces.

A fuller version of this report, with figures, is obtainable at:
http://www.sipr.ac.uk/downloads/ScotCen_2013_Local_Policing.pdf