

FROM CRIME FIGHTING TO PUBLIC PROTECTION: THE SHAPING OF POLICE OFFICERS' SENSE OF ROLE

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Introduction

From a straightforward legal and organisational perspective, the police are tasked with the maintenance of law and order, the protection of the public and their property and in the detection, investigation and prevention of crime. But we also know that the realities of policing involve a much less clearly defined role, indeed a very much less crime focused role which concentrates upon broader dispute management, order maintenance and welfare concerns. Bittner's classic account of what the police do is as relevant today as when it was first written. Police officers' work involves a reactive response to events and represents "something-that-ought-not-be-to-happening-and-about-which-somone-had-better-do-something-now"¹.

Recent public sector cuts in the fields of health and social care and mental health services (not to mention policing itself) have brought into sharp focus the enormous range of non-crime related activity which the police are associated with. The College of Policing estimates that non-crime related incidents account for 83 per cent of all 'command and control' calls that come into call centre staff². In this respect, Brodeur has distinguished between two policing tasks – 'high policing' and 'low policing'³. 'High policing' involves intelligence-related policing activities which utilise both human and technological intelligence apparatus. This is the type of activity perhaps more readily associated with the fictional representations of the role of the police. 'Low policing' refers to the more mundane day-to-day reality of much of the policing role which focuses upon

responding to criminal or potentially criminal incidents, order maintenance, reassurance and community engagement. Millie has conceptualised this further by dividing 'low policing' into 'wide policing' and 'narrow policing'⁴. He argues that historically but most notably since the early 1990s, the role of the police has become significantly wider and encompasses the diverse and multi-faceted demands of anti-terrorism, reassurance, fear of crime, catching criminals, crime prevention and crime reduction.

Although there are a myriad of voices and opinions on the thorny question of what is, and perhaps also what should be, the role of the police, little is heard from one particular quarter – frontline police officers themselves. New research conducted by this author⁵ has followed a sample of new recruits to the police service through the first four years of their careers and considered how and in what ways, they adapt to their new identity as a police officer. Police officers were interviewed after the first five weeks in the job (TIME A), after six months (TIME B), after one year (TIME C) and after four years (TIME D)⁶. This rich source of data has revealed significant change over time in the new recruits' attitudes and beliefs. A central focus of the research was on officers' changing attitudes during the early years of their careers and the key influences upon the formation and development of those attitudes. Part of that analysis was a consideration of what the new recruits saw as their role as a police officer.

1 Bittner (1990, p. 249).

2 College of Policing (2015).

3 Brodeur (1983).

4 Millie (2013).

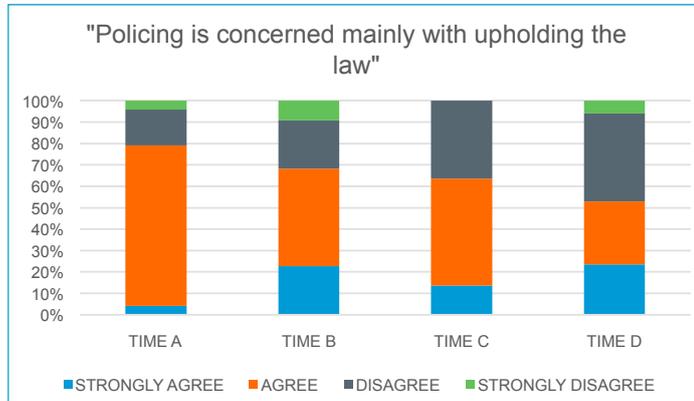
5 Charman (2017).

6 98 interviews were conducted within one police force in England. This comprised of two new cohorts of officers interviewed on four separate occasions plus police tutors and student development recruitment officers.

Measuring attitude change

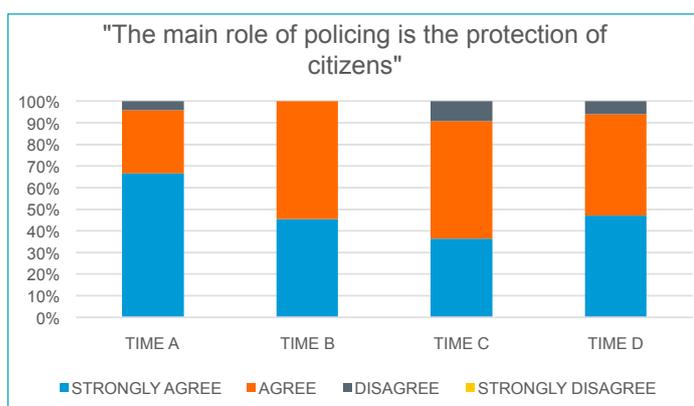
At each interview stage the new police recruits were read 22 different statements, to which they were asked to indicate the strength of their belief. Five of those 22 statements concentrated on the *role* of the police. Each of these five statements will now be considered in turn.

Figure 1: "Policing is concerned mainly with upholding the law"



Although the majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "*policing is concerned mainly with upholding the law*", the strength of this agreement did vary considerably at different stages of their early careers. This fell from 79.2 per cent at TIME A⁷ to 52.9 per cent at TIME D. This would reflect much of the broader discussions in the interviews about the disconnect between their perceptions of the policing role and the reality. Officers expressed surprise about the quantity of non-crime and non-policing demands that they were involved with, particularly in relation to issues of mental health and missing persons, which it was felt should be dealt with primarily by other agencies.

Figure 2: "The main role of policing is the protection of citizens"



⁷ At TIME A, the new recruits had all recently completed the Certificate of Knowledge in Policing qualification which focuses heavily upon the legal powers of the police. They were also in the midst of their first training experience with their police force which focused upon applying the law in everyday policing situations.

Figure 2 shows that a very large majority of recruits either strongly agreed or agreed that "*the main role of policing is the protection of citizens*". There is a change in the strength of agreement of recruits, as the percentage who strongly agreed and agreed fluctuated over time. However, what is of note is that the percentage who disagreed was minimal and no respondent strongly disagreed⁸.

Figure 3: "The primary role of a police officer is to protect society from criminals and deviants"

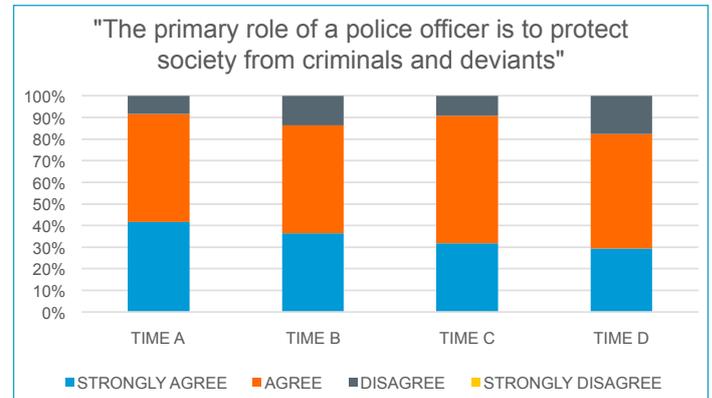
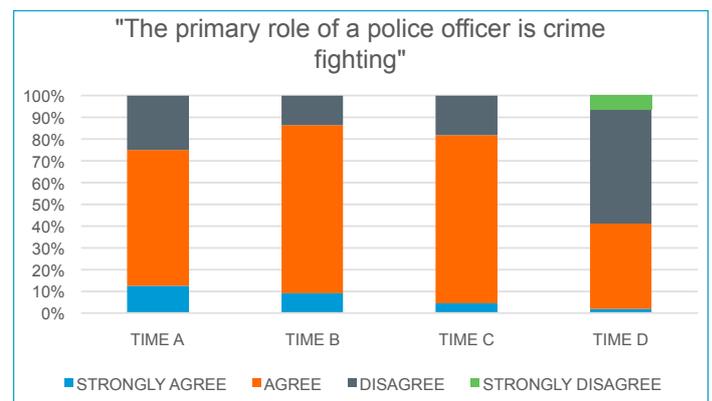


Figure 3 shows that when the percentages of those who agree or strongly agree with the statement are combined, it is clear that all interview stages, the majority of respondents agreed that "*the primary role of a police officer is to protect society from criminals and deviants*". The number who strongly agreed however fell at each interview stage from a high of 41.7 per cent at TIME A to a low of 29.4 per cent at TIME D. The percentage of respondents who disagreed with the statement rose from 8.3 per cent at TIME A to 17.6 per cent at TIME D.

Figure 4: "The primary role of a police officer is crime fighting"



⁸ The results of the Friedman test indicated that there is a **statistically significant difference** in the answers given across the final two time points: TIME C (one year into the role of police constable) and TIME D (four years into the role of police constable) $\chi^2(3, n = 17) = 14.39, p < .002$. Wilcoxon analysis revealed a **significant difference** between scores at TIME C and D, $p = .005$. The strength of the effect is calculated to be **moderate to large** (eta squared = 0.68).

Figure 4 shows that at TIME A, B, and C (ie during the first year of a police officer's career), the majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that "the primary role of a police officer is crime fighting". This was at its peak when respondents were first serving as response and patrol officers in force when 86.4 per cent agreed or strongly agreed. However, that number declined noticeably when officers were interviewed at TIME D (four years into their service). At this point, the majority of officers now disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement making a combined total of 53 per cent⁹.

Figure 5: "Real police work is about catching criminals"

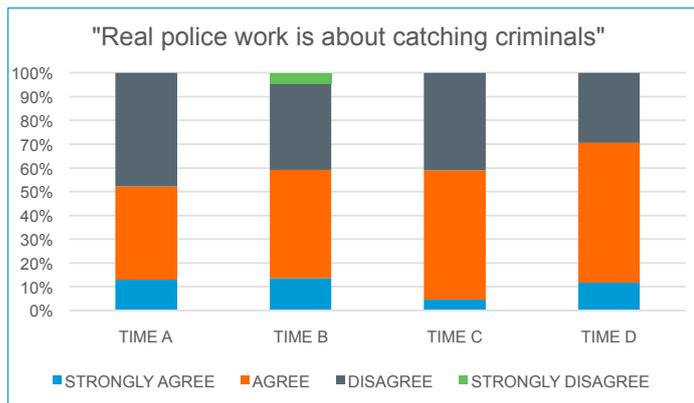


Figure 5 shows that until TIME D, there was a fairly even split between those respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that "real police work is about catching criminals" and those respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. However as with many of these statements provided to respondents, it was at the final time point, TIME D, when changes in perceptions emerged more strongly. At TIME D, 70.6 per cent were in agreement while 29.4 per cent were in disagreement.

A comparison of all five of these statements revealed that a larger number of officers considered that the role of the police was concerned with the protection of citizens rather than either protecting society from criminals and deviants, upholding the law, crime fighting or catching criminals. Taking TIME D as an example, 47.1 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that "the primary role of the police is crime fighting", 52.9 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that "policing was mainly concerned with upholding the law", 70.6 per cent agreed or strongly

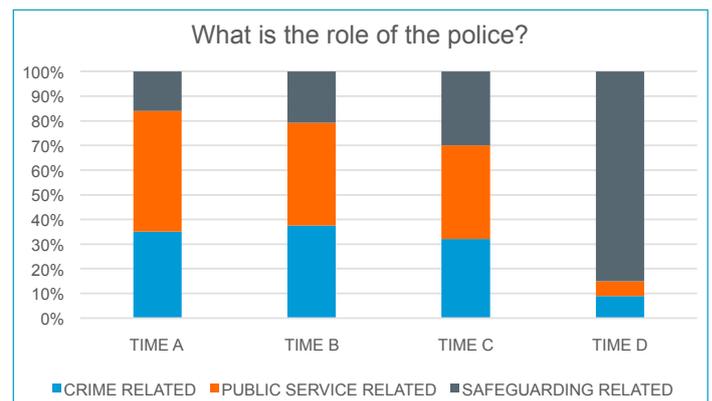
agreed that "real police work is about catching criminals", 82.3 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that "the primary role of the police was to protect society from criminals and deviants" whereas 94.2 per cent of respondents at TIME D agreed or strongly agreed that "the main role of policing is the protection of citizens". The two statements that scored most highly in agreement mentioned the words 'protect' or 'protection'. This does not quite fit with the Conservative party's vision of police officers as "tough, no-nonsense crime-fighters"¹⁰.

Reflecting upon attitude change

The changing focus from officers towards public protection relates closely to the interview discussions with the respondents on their beliefs and perceptions towards the role of the police. Officers were asked to talk generally about what they felt was the role of the police. Their answers fell broadly into three categories.

First, there were roles associated with crime such as apprehending offenders, making arrests, gathering evidence or crime reduction. Second, there were wider public service sentiments about public protection, visibility and reassurance. Third, there was the more specific role of 'helping' and safeguarding vulnerable people, whether this was due to their status as a victim of crime or in their inherent vulnerability due to their age or their mental ill-health.

Figure 6: What is the role of the police?



As can be seen in Figure 6, at TIME A, 35 per cent of the statements made about the role of the police belonged to this first 'crime' category. However, by TIME D this had fallen dramatically to just nine per cent of the statements made about the role of the police being related to crime. This equated to three separate comments made by only two officers. The following

⁹ The results of the Friedman test indicated that there is a **statistically significant difference** in the answers given across the final two time points: TIME C (one year into the role of police constable) and TIME D (four years into the role of police constable) $X^2(3, n=17) = 23.02, p < .000$. Wilcoxon analysis revealed a **significant difference** between scores at TIME C and D, $p = .001$. The strength of the effect is calculated to be **moderate to large** (eta squared = 0.78).

¹⁰ May, (2011).

quotes illustrate this change in attitude towards the perceived and actual role of the police:

"30 per cent crime, 70 per cent social work which is something I didn't really expect ... I thought it'd be a bit more crime fighting" (B1).

"We do a lot of customer service, and customer focused work, and a lot of social work, and a lot of mental health assessment. We don't seem to do an awful lot of crime fighting" (C1).

"I very rarely deal with crime" (D3).

"I can't tell you the last time I went to a crime" (D10).

"crime-wise, it's probably the smallest part now, I would say" (D6).

A similar pattern emerges of recruits mentioning the broad public protection and reassurance roles of the police as can be seen in Figure 6. This began at 49 per cent at TIME A and then almost disappeared by TIME D with only six per cent of the statements made about the role of the police being related to public protection and reassurance. There was also an increasing sense of frustration among the recruits at community engagement in this aspect of their job:

"I've been in the environment and seen what it used to be like and that's what I wanted to do but it's not like that anymore. It's too fluffy I think. We do what everyone else wants us to do ... I bet you can't find anyone of this rank that will say "ask the community". Anyone above that will say yes because that's what they need to say" (C6).

"All of this rubbish about asking the public is just a front of, we're pretending to involve you ... I mean, it's good having some engagement and telling people what you've done but I think it needs to be, this is how we're doing it, this is what we're doing, and then when it works, tell people. If it doesn't work, tell people, rather than asking people what they want us to do, because they'll have us walking around in big hats and hi-vis jackets being completely ineffective, doing anything" (D1).

Finally, there was the more specific role of 'helping' and safeguarding vulnerable people, whether this was due to their status as a victim of crime or their inherent vulnerability due to their age or their mental ill-health. This was rarely raised as a role and function of the police when the new recruits were in training school where, as can be seen in Figure 6, only 16 per cent of the statements made related to this area. However, this steadily and then dramatically rose. The figure was 21 per cent at TIME B, 30 per cent at TIME C and then finally 85 per cent at TIME D. Many of the respondents spoke of the amount of their time which was devoted to this area:

"I've learnt a lot about safeguarding, I never really thought about that when I first started" (D9).

"everything is a safeguarding exercise" (D10).

"I think it is all about helping people when all is said and done" (B9).

"Community oriented, speaking to people, rather than just all action policing" (A9).

This dramatic change from a focus on the role of the police as concerned with crime and the broad principles associated with public protection to a role focused specifically on vulnerability appears to be a reflection of three mutually dependent factors. First, there is the changing role of the police which has not only become wider and more diverse¹¹, incorporating both the preservation and the production of social order¹² but has also been affected by budgetary cuts elsewhere within the public and care sectors. The following quotes indicate an awareness of, and a frustration with, this change:

"the job has changed as well and it is geared more now towards safeguarding and vulnerability. I think the nature of crime has changed a lot since I started. It's not just fights in the street. There is a lot more ongoing issues hidden behind closed doors, often like your domestics or the stuff with the child sexual offences" (Z11).

"the expectation of what the police should be doing is far greater than it was back many, many years ago" (Z4).

"I think quite soon we'll have to make a decision we're either going to deal with crime or just deal with vulnerability, because at the moment we're not particularly doing both" (Z3).

Second, there is the changing realisation from the new recruits of what the role of the police *actually* entails. Many of them initially felt that their role was to "try and make society more cohesive ... you try to help people get on with each other" (A2) but the more time they serve, the greater the 'reality shock' as to the limits of their influence, the nature of the more regular activities that they are involved with and the limits of their time.

"What they teach you at [name of training school] is what, you know, what people still believe is the role of a police officer and it's about building files, it's about crime investigation, it's actual victims, you know, and stuff like that. And actually, a large proportion of our work isn't that. It's dealing with people with mental health issues, it's dealing with social issues and all sorts of stuff. So, actual crime fighting very, very small proportion of our work" (D8).

"we don't have time to be proactive" (D9).

The level of disappointment at the perceived gap between the expectations of the job and the realities of the job has the potential to produce a more cynical, suspicious,

11 Millie (2013).

12 Reiner (2000).

alienated officer who displays lower levels of empathy and higher levels of authoritarianism. There is therefore a third explanation as to why the recruits express such a dramatic change in their views on the role of the police and that is influenced by the appearance of cynicism.

Third therefore, there is the strong and growing sense of cynicism from officers which is displayed regularly and knowingly as their length of service increases. This has the capacity to influence their attitudes both towards their work and the public that they respond to.

“mobile social work or mobile marriage guidance counsellor” (C5).

“You are a social worker – you’re mother, you’re father – you’re an auntie, you’re an uncle. You are Jeremy Kyle, it feels like sometimes” (Z4).

“Clearing up people’s problems, basically, people who can’t live a normal life, is the majority of our work” (D6).

“you deal with a lot of people’s problems where you think, does it really need a police officer here? Should you be wasting police time? And we spend a lot of time...or police time just sorting people’s problems out ... disputes over property, over relationships ... just people moaning about people” (B7).

“it’s just constant mopping up of people, who literally, cannot run their own lives” (D10).

“glorified security guards” (D8).

This issue of cynicism appears to one of the most longstanding and geographically widespread features of policing cultures. It has been found in research which has spanned decades¹³, is identified in most corners of the globe¹⁴ and is exhibited in both verbal behaviour and in written blogs¹⁵.

Reconsidering the role of the police

This research has revealed that police officers’ perceptions of what they consider to be their role has altered, affected both by their length of service and the changing realities of policing work in more challenging economic times. It could be argued that much of this change derives from a fundamental change to the arena of policing where the focus is much more upon the congenial activities such as citizen *protection*, public *reassurance* and *safeguarding* rather than on the more combative activities such as *fighting* crime and *catching* criminals. However, it could also be argued that

historically, police officers have always liked to portray the crime-fighting image despite most evidence suggesting that this has only ever constituted a small part of a police officer’s role. This is what Manning has referred to as the “drama of control”¹⁶ of the police where the symbolism of the police is as important as their actions. The narratives of policing then have never quite matched the actions. Perhaps that is where we are seeing the most fundamental change therefore. It is not only to be found in the changing *role* of the police officer but can also be found in the changing acceptance of the new *narratives* surrounding the role of the police. Taking the interviews after four years of service as an example and in discussions about the role of the police, the new recruits placed ‘protection of citizens’ first followed by ‘protect society’, then ‘catching criminals’, then ‘upholding the law’ and then finally ‘crime fighting’. Policing and police officers, it could be argued, are now more comfortable with their social identity as ‘peacekeepers’ rather than ‘crime-fighters’. The adherence to crime-fighting has been shed both literally and figuratively.

There is therefore some confusion here:

1. On the one hand lies the *cultural symbolism* of the police which is influenced by a number of sources. It is held in the abstract beliefs of the public. It is found in the media representations of policing, both fictional and non-fictional. It is encouraged by various governments¹⁷. It is also found in the physical icons of policing.
2. On the other hand, there is the *reality* of the policing role.

How the identities of an organisation are constructed and developed is in an interpretation of these meanings. This is part of the sense-making of the police occupational culture¹⁸.

The confusion illustrated however has the potential to create a vacuum in the understandings of new recruits to the police service which police cultural characteristics are waiting to fill. If there is a gap between the perceived and actual realities of the role of the police, and there is a gap in the prescribed police training and the necessary skills¹⁹, then the normative and cultural practices which are passed down from one generation of the police to another will, in the absence of anything more useful and relevant, be allowed to flourish.

13 Reiner (1978, 2010); Crank (1998); de Lint (1998); Scripture (1997); Loftus (2008, 2009).

14 Crank (1998); Chan (2003); Steyn and Mkhize (2016); Sollund (2008).

15 Atherton (2012).

16 Manning (2003, p. 16).

17 Loader refers to the UK coalition government of 2010-2015 seeing itself as “releasing the police’s inner crime-fighter” (2014, p. 43).

18 Rantatalo (2016).

19 Charman (2017).

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