

# POLICE IN PLACE

Why the police need to reconnect locally

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# 1. Re-placing safety

We have been living through a crisis of profoundly felt insecurity, in uncertain times and in places that often seem less comfortable and more hostile than they did before. Even before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, nationally representative research identified ‘safety’ as the most concerning issue facing UK communities<sup>1</sup>, while the Police Foundation’s own research highlighted how a pervasive sense of local deterioration was merging with concerns about knife crime and the absence of visible policing, to bring menace and unease to once-familiar public spaces<sup>2</sup>.

Layered on top of these anxieties, Covid-19 and the unprecedented social restrictions imposed to limit its spread, have fundamentally changed our understanding of what it means to be safe and to play our part in making safety for others. Covid has, quite literally, put us in our place. From the spring of 2020, very many of us found ourselves re-rooted in our home turf; we spent more time in our neighbourhoods, made more use of our parks and public spaces, and walked new routes, adding detail, colour, and depth of association to our local mental maps. But as we got to know our places better, we were also put on our guard. Our permitted daily exercise and essential errands were often tinged with invisible danger and our scrutiny, apprehension, and indignation at the actions of those who share our places, became more acute.

For many of us, Covid also changed our relationships with those who live around us. As the crisis took hold, we checked in with our neighbours and shopped for those who could not do so themselves. We joined local internet forums, clapped together in new doorstep rituals of shared gratitude, and nodded more often to half-strangers as we passed in the street (if only to acknowledge the care we took in keeping apart). But as crisis became attrition, we turned more watchful and began, also perhaps, to feel more watched. Ultimately, the power of adversity to bind neighbours together in *communities*, was diminished by the restrictions imposed to keep us safe, but also apart.

As we emerge from the strange darkness of a global pandemic into an irrevocably different world, it is time to think again, together, and afresh, about what it means

to be, and to feel, safe in our places and among our neighbours, and about how our public services can help to re-make places of safety in which we can enjoy our renewed freedoms without fear, and in fair balance with others.

# 2. Safe ground in a complex world

Our modern world is complex. We live simultaneously in multiple, interconnected domains, all of which can carry real and serious threats to our safety that, as a society, we must seek to mitigate and minimise. Today we recognise that our home, family, and social environments can contain risks that warrant outside intervention and that our online spaces and financial and business domains need to be made safe so that we can operate there with confidence. These are the new frontiers of risk that have animated the agencies charged with keeping us safe over recent years and that will, no-doubt, continue to have a major bearing on our security for decades to come. But we should also recognise these overlaid ‘environments’, ‘spaces’, ‘realms’ and ‘domains’ for what they are: metaphors of place that remind us that our safety – and in particular, our *experience* of safety – also remains geographic, proximate and ‘analogue’<sup>3</sup>, in vivid and important ways that have not received sufficient attention amid the din of exploding complexity.

The forces that shape today’s world – globalisation, technology, and market economics – are homogenising. Culturally, architecturally, environmentally, in terms of what we eat, what we own and how we think, we are being impelled towards geographic sameness. Although our individual choices may have widened, they have also become more uniform, regardless of where we are. These currents of progress erode at our local distinctiveness – and so it is with our thinking about safety. When we are confronted by sophisticated online fraudsters operating across international borders, or terrorist ideologies inspired by geopolitical conflict and propagated over the internet, the nuances of our local neighbourhoods and the everyday happenings of our proximate world can seem parochial and unimportant

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3 In discussing the new forms of social control “*beyond the police’s purview*”, that may be required to regulate the “information revolution”, Innes et al comment: “*It will be vital that the police do not neglect their responsibilities for the more ‘analogue’ kinds of problem; precisely the kinds of local conflicts and disputes that are centred by Neighbourhood Policing*” (p.208). See: Innes, M., Roberts, C., Lowe, T. and Innes, H. (2020) *Neighbourhood Policing: The Rise and Fall of a Policing Model*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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1 Morrison, E., Roeschert, F., Tauschinski, J. and Boelman, V. (2020) *Safety in Numbers? A research agenda with communities, for communities*. Institute for Community Studies.

2 Higgins, A. (2019) *Understanding the Public’s Priorities for Policing*. London: The Police Foundation.

by comparison. Our search for more sophisticated ‘evidence-based’ and ‘efficient’ responses to social harms has also pulled us towards the universal and away from the situated. We have, perhaps, been too occupied in looking for ‘what works’, when we know that very little works everywhere<sup>4</sup>, and that place-based, specific and ‘problem oriented’ interventions tend to produce effective outcomes<sup>5</sup>. In short, we have been startled by the new threats of modernity and forgotten where we are.

For all the benefits and public value that these forces of progress can afford, they can also erode something fundamental from the viscerally grounded experience of being human. For all our abstract rationalism and globalised, cloud-based modernity, we remain inescapably situated creatures, made of flesh and blood, experience and intention, attached by gravity, society, and habit to particular bits of world. When this is overridden, we react by asserting our immanence. We may capitulate more often than we prevail, but in many of us there is an urge to protest our locatedness, to cheer for our home team and support local businesses, to choose produce from near-by fields over mass produced imported goods, put local people before corporate profit, and demand that new building developments are in keeping with the ‘feel’ of the place<sup>6</sup>. But if we are moved to protect and express our local distinctiveness in our food and architecture, then why not also in the invisible edifices of public safety and social capital that equally shape the experience of being ‘here’? And why not in the objectives, methods, and priorities of the public services we fund to maintain and promote these shared assets?

The places we inhabit are more than just spaces, they are ‘ways of knowing’, full of meaning and

consequence<sup>7</sup>. Each has its unique character, its ‘spirit’ or *genius loci*, shaped by the distinctive combination of history and habit, demography and economy, ecology and topography, story, reputation, and connection to elsewhere, that make it what it is. And prominent among the traits of place – bold in what it means to us – is where it registers on our safety spectrum. Does it tell us we belong here, that we can live, grow, and thrive? Or must we put up our defences, shrink back or move on?

It follows, therefore, that if we want to better understand what makes places more or less safe, and the people in them *feel* more or less safe, we must pay more attention to these underlying particularities of place, and what they combine and amount to. But more than this, in seeking to *make* safety, our public servants and the systems they work within, need to be more deeply tuned in to what it means to spend our lives *someplace* – not just at the geo-locations for IP addresses, in grid squares on hotspot maps or the catchment areas for teams of caseworkers, but in the unique bits of human geography, rich with meaning and story, in which we expose our soft-tissue, hard-earned stuff and precious freedoms to the respect and responsibility of others, as they do to us.

Our modern world can seem frighteningly complex and demands a sophisticated and multi-dimensional security response, but as we turn to engage the parallel threats of the future, we must also remember to pay the old spirits of place the respect they still deserve. They have been ignored for too long and are becoming hardened and malign from neglect.

### 3. Police in place

Police and place are intrinsically connected, in fact etymologically, along with ‘policy’, ‘polite’ and ‘politics’, the word ‘police’ derives from the Greek *polis*, meaning ‘city’ – marking all these constructs as parts of the vital social machinery that make the large-scale sharing of place by humans a possibility. It is a close association that extends well into the history of the British police service. From Sir Robert Peel’s ‘New Police’ for London, organised around a system of local ‘beats’, to the network of police houses that extended the long arm of the law out to the provinces, the first 130 years of British Policing were intrinsically (and by necessity) ‘place-based’.

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4 In summarising the conclusions of the ‘What Works’ evidence review, undertaken to develop the College of Policing’s *Crime Reduction Tool Kit*, Professor Gloria Laycock noted: “*nothing works everywhere; lots of things work somewhere; nothing happens just because someone said it should, and initiatives are sometimes expensive – but sometimes the same initiatives are free*”. See: Laycock, G. (2018) *Crime reduction toolkit for the security professional*. *City Security Magazine* [online] 17 September.

5 Lum, C. Koper, C and Telep, C. (2010) *The Evidence Based Policing Matrix*. *Journal of Experimental Criminology* Vol. 7(3) pp.3–26. Also: Weisburd, D., Telep, C., Hinkle, J. and Eck, J., (2008) *The Effects of Problem-Oriented Policing on Crime and Disorder*. *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 2008:14.

6 Norberg-Schulz, C. (1980) *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*. Is considered the foundational work for the study of place in relation to architecture. For a short summary see <https://www.placeness.com/spirit-of-placegenius-loci/>.

7 Cresswell, T. (2015) *Place: An Introduction*. Second Edition. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell. (Ch 1).

But, as with so many social certainties, the second half of the 20th century saw the close coupling of constable and community begin to come apart. Along with consumer goods, recreational drugs, the end of National Service, emancipated women leaving empty homes to go to work, and rock and roll and revolution, the 1960s gave the police sirens and radios, 999 call after 999 call, and new 'modern' ways of organising themselves. Bobbies came off the beat and climbed into panda cars. They ranged further, became less familiar, stopped policing places and started policing *incidents*. Crime continued to rise, the post-war settlement continued to unwind, and this more impersonal, less grounded police service found itself increasingly at odds with a more liberated, less deferential British public: race riots in the cities, striking miners in the provinces, corruption in the papers<sup>8</sup>. There had to be a better way.

'Community' Policing, as a strategy for reconnection, took time to reach the mainstream. Despite radical experiments like those by John Alderson, (the liberal Chief Constable of Devon and Cornwall Police during the 1970s and early 80s, and reputedly Margaret Thatcher's least favourite cop), and the recommendations of Lord Scarman after the Brixton riots, it was not until the current millennium that concerted national efforts were made to re-root British policing. Between 2005 and 2008 New Labour's flagship policing reforms saw a patchwork blanket of *Neighbourhood* Policing teams rolled out over England and Wales. Under the programme 3,600 little pieces of place were staked out and each given their own cadre of dedicated local guardians – some 30,000 police and (newly created) Community Support officers in all – all, at least in theory, at the disposal of local people, to walk their streets, learn their stories and sort out the problems that worried them most. The pilot scheme worked well but, as so often, delivering at scale proved more of a challenge<sup>9</sup>. The police certainly got more visible, but (arguably) could never quite agree with local

people on what was most important, never quite learned how to see 'problems' in the context of places, got hung up on their own confidence ratings and ate too many biscuits with people who *thought* they knew what was going on around here, but didn't know the half of it.

It is now clear that Alderson's revolutionary vision for a new 'first tier' of locally embedded policing delivery (to which 'second-tier' emergency response and 'third-tier' crime investigation would serve only as support functions<sup>10</sup>) was never brought to fruition. A decade after the national roll out – after austerity and political 'localism' and the discovery of 'hidden' vulnerability had done their work – local policing in most parts of England and Wales had fallen predictably back to a 'firefighting' footing (although, ironically, the fire service has made great strides on prevention), and the great Neighbourhood experiment was revealed for what it was: augmentation not transformation. In 2018, when the Police Foundation pieced together the lost narrative of the model's post-roll-out decade<sup>11</sup>, most uniformed cops (regardless of job title) were spending every rostered hour blue-lighting between emergency calls (many also carrying large caseloads of routine 'beat-crime' investigations), buffeted by an onslaught of 'demand', dealing with the urgent at the expense of the essential. Some forces even had the rhetorical temerity to rebrand their response cops as *neighbourhood* patrol officers (or some linguistic variant) – because everything happens someplace, right?

In most forces we found a senior officer with a knot in their stomach, fighting off that nagging feeling that this was all going to end badly, knowing deep-down that a police force that can do nothing but twitch reflexively between crises has relinquished its agency and risks cutting off its lifeblood of local intelligence and public goodwill. Here and there we found one who had managed to dig in a heel or tug hard on the bedsheet of their operating model, and claw back a fistful of capacity for locally focused proactivity. But where we did, we often found that the units of policing had shifted again. Embedded, preventative local policing, retooled for the age of risk and vulnerability, was becoming *individualised*. Local safety-making now meant managing high-risk offenders, protecting vulnerable victims, sorting out multi-agency service provision for 'frequent flyers' and working with Troubled Families. Not

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8 Newburn, T. (2003) Policing since 1945. In Newburn, T. (Ed.) *Handbook of Policing*. Cullompton: Willan, pp.64–106.

9 For the positive evaluation of the original National Reassurance Policing Programme see: Tuffin, R., Morris, J. and Poole, A. (2006) *An Evaluation of the Impact of the National Reassurance Policing Programme*. Home Office Research Study 296. London: Home Office. Subsequent studies of the impact of the national Neighbourhood Policing Programme failed to demonstrate widespread effects. See: Quinton, P. and Morris, J. (2008) *Neighbourhood Policing: The Impact of Piloting and Early National Implementation*. London: Home Office. Also: Mason, M. (2009) *Findings from the second year of the national Neighbourhood Policing Programme evaluation*. Home Office Research Report 14: Key Implications. London: Home Office.

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10 Alderson, J. (1979) *Policing Freedom*. Exeter: Macdonald and Evans.

11 Higgins, A. (2018) *The Future of Neighbourhood Policing*. London: The Police Foundation.

problems, nor places, but ‘cases’ were becoming the new units of police work in neighbourhoods. The places that carry safety (or its absence) in their very meanings – even those where ‘cases’ inevitably cluster – had somehow evaded police attention again.

The attrition did not go unnoticed. From 2013 onwards the police Inspectorate raised increasingly strong warnings about the ‘erosion’ of neighbourhood policing, culminating, in 2017, in the waving of a bright ‘red flag’, to highlight the ‘rationing’ of local police services that had crept in under conditions of austerity and shifting demand<sup>12</sup>. As part of the remedial requirement, the service, led by its College, was instructed to consult the evidence-base and clearly state what it considered to be ‘essential’. The ‘guidelines’<sup>13</sup> that emerged from that exercise have put a brake on the dissolution of neighbourhood policing into rhetoric and anachronism. Where the Policing Vision, (the service’s shared statement of its intended direction for the decade, published in 2016<sup>14</sup>) conspicuously referred to the approach only as what had previously been ‘*invested in*’, the guidelines reconnected the commitment to develop a ‘*sophisticated understanding of community needs*’ with the necessity for police to actually be *present* in places, to *talk* to the people who live and spend time there, and to *understand* problems in their local contexts (as if this essential knowledge could somehow otherwise emerge out of ‘big data’ algorithms or information sharing protocols, without the messy and inefficient trouble of putting boots on the ground or looking the locals in the eye).

In effect, the guidelines process (and the Police Foundation’s research, conducted around the same time<sup>15</sup>) showed how attending to the particularities of place can be just as relevant to a policing agenda animated by harm prevention and demand reduction as it was in the era of reassurance and antisocial behaviour from which the Neighbourhood model first emerged. In its wake, new peer-networks and training programmes have been developed within policing, and there has been resurgent interest in ‘problem-solving’ approaches<sup>16</sup>, but we should not mistake emergency

stabilisation for recovery. There has been no significant fiscal or ideological reinvestment in ‘community’ safety or the policing of place. Despite the Prime Minister’s announcement, on taking office, that an extra 20,000 police officers would be recruited because “*people want to see more officers in their neighbourhoods, protecting the public and cutting crime*”<sup>17</sup>, only 400 of the first tranche of 6,000 new recruits have been deployed into ‘neighbourhood’ roles, exactly the same number cut from the national PCSO cohort over the same period<sup>18</sup>. Neither, in recent years, have short-lived scares over resurgence of Islamist terrorism<sup>19</sup> or the intensification of knife violence<sup>20</sup> provided sufficient impetus for a meaningful return of police to place; appeals born of such single-issue crises have repeatedly failed to capture the imagination of those who hold the purse-strings. The era-defining social ruptures that emerged in 2020, however, should give us cause for a much more fundamental reappraisal of how we police and are policed.

## 4. 2020: A year for thinking differently

The prism of an unprecedented period of public health lockdowns, that began in 2020, has refracted and magnified many of the threats we face, right across the safety spectrum. As we hastily shifted new facets of our lives online, exploitative organised criminals reacted with frightening speed, and for those living with the spectre

17 BBC (2019) [Recruitment of 20,000 new police officers to begin ‘within weeks’](#). *BBC News* [online] 26 July 2019.

18 Home Office (2020) [Police workforce, England and Wales:31 March 2020: data tables third edition \(tables F1 and F3\)](#). Compared against: Home Office (2019) [Police workforce, England and Wales:31 March 2019: data tables second edition \(tables F1 and F3\)](#).

19 In September 2017, following terrorist attacks in Westminster, Manchester and London Bridge, Dame Sara Thornton (then chair of the National Police Chiefs’ Council) made the case for a reinvestment in neighbourhood policing, stating: “*Fewer officers and police community support officers will cut off the intelligence that is so crucial to preventing attacks. Withdrawal from communities risks undermining their trust in us at a time when we need people to have the confidence to share information with us*”. See: Dodd, V. (2017) [Don’t cut police anti-terror budget as threat grows, warns top officer](#). *The Guardian* [online]. 22 September.

20 In 2018, leaked Home Office analysis appeared to make the connection between rising violent crime and the reduction in police officer numbers. The link was rejected by ministers and not mentioned in the government’s Serious Violence Strategy. In response Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn argued: “*Over the last eight years the Conservative government has decimated local services, the core services that are an essential part of holding our communities together... You simply cannot maintain community cohesion when you slash funding to the police service and cut the number of officers on our streets by 21,000.*” See: Dodd, V. (2018) [Police Cuts ‘likely contributed’ to rise in violent crime, leaked report reveals](#). *The Guardian* [online]. 9 April.

12 Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) (2017) [PEEL Police Effectiveness 2016: A National Overview](#). London: HMIC.

13 See: <https://www.college.police.uk/guidance/neighbourhood-policing>

14 Association of Police and Crime Commissioners (APCC) and National Police Chiefs’ Council (NPCC) (2016). [Policing Vision 2025](#). London: APCC and NPCC.

15 Higgins (2018) *op. cit.*

16 See: <https://www.southyorks.police.uk/find-out/problem-solving-and-crime-prevention-programme/>

of domestic abuse, *staying home* meant anything but *staying safe*. But arguably the greatest disruption to police business occurred, not in these digital or private spaces, but in the traditional, public, 'analogue' places from which we temporarily withdrew. As our routine activities settled into calmer patterns, 'traditional' crime and the incessant din of police 'demand' quietened for a while. But as it did, the police took up a new challenge: how to achieve public compliance with the most restrictive set of controls on social life imposed in this country since the Second World War? These were curbs on our conduct unlike any we have lived through before. Restrictions that kept us from our families, suspended our right to roam and diminished many livelihoods. Rules that reflected catastrophic, distant harm back on our quotidian business and tempted each and every one of us to bend, excuse and exceptionalise; that made border-line miscreants of us all.

As the police quickly realised, these were not laws that could be *enforced*, or at least, could only been done so with 'strategic discretion'<sup>21</sup>, after all efforts to *engage, explain* and *encourage* had been exhausted<sup>22</sup>. The correct, and only practicable option available, was to evoke the mythic British tradition of policing by consent and seek to activate public compliance through persuasion (rather than force), and the exercise of *soft power*. On some levels, and for some time, the approach proved successful. British police issued many fewer fines for Covid breaches than their overseas counterparts, and, for much of the period, managed to avoid significant conflict with the public (in fact, as a result of the approach, relations with Downing Street were at times more strained<sup>23</sup>). But virus transmission rates in our communities remained tragically high, at points we had seen more Covid deaths for our population size than all but a handful of small countries<sup>24</sup>, and public frustration at the casual and routine flouting of lockdown rules by others became a socially nebulous feature of the latter phases of our crisis.

We are justified, therefore, in asking: how *effective* did this policing approach prove for ensuring public safety? How well prepared were Britain's police to secure consensual public cooperation with life-critical emergency regulations when called on to do so at short notice? How well charged were their batteries of soft power? How well-tended was the home ground on which they sought the cooperation of the public to make safety?

We know that people follow rules and cooperate with officials, not because they fear the consequences of disobedience, but when they believe that it is *the right thing to do*. We know that when officials are seen to behave fairly and respectfully, to listen and allow people to have their say, and when they can demonstrate that they are well-intentioned, trustworthy, and aligned with our values, they can generate the legitimacy and authority from which compliance and cooperation then flow<sup>25</sup>. This applies in discreet 'one-off' interactions between citizens and police officers, but it is surely also true that deeper reservoirs of trust and consent need to be accumulated over time; that cooperation is nurtured by dialogue and relationship and a reciprocal recognition that each party understands something of the other's motives, identity, and ways of seeing the world. In other words, citizens and police officers need to *know where each other are coming from*. Only policing that is grounded in place, connected to communities and familiar with the stories they tell, can foster this mutual understanding of motive and back story, and nurture the assets of trust and readiness that are the scaffold of community resilience.

This may not be our last pandemic. In the future, extreme weather events and social unrest may pose as great a threat to public safety as the types of crime that have traditionally kept our police officers busy. If we want our police to be able to bring people with them when the unexpected happens or when things get tense, then we need, as a society, to invest in their baseline relationship with the public at a granular level. This means *re-placing* cops where they can listen, make

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21 Clements, J. and Aitkenhead, E. (2020) *Policing the long crisis: an appraisal of the police response to Covid-19*. Crest Advisory and The Police Foundation.

22 National Police Chiefs' Council (2020) *Coronavirus: Policing approach remains to use enforcement as last resort*.

23 Clements and Aitkenhead *op. cit.*

24 By late January 2021, the UK had recorded 1,454 COVID deaths per million population, only San Marino, Belgium and Slovenia had recorded more. By late May 2021, 15 countries had seen more deaths for their population size. See: <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-deaths>.

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25 Procedural Justice Theory was most famously demonstrated by Tyler (2006). For a recent articulation see Hough (2020). Nagin and Telep (2020) are sceptical about the potential for procedurally just action by police to achieve a narrow crime control mission but argue for the wider 'social welfare' benefits of mutually civil relations between police and citizens.

Tyler, T. (2006) *Why People Obey the Law*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Hough, M. (2021) *Good Policing*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Nagin, D. and Telep, C. (2020) Procedural Justice and Legal Compliance: A revisionist perspective. *Criminology and Public Policy*, 2020:1-26.

eye-contact, become familiar and get to know, and feel, and understand, something of what it is to be *here*, *now*. It is in this common ground – this shared sense of local context – that the invaluable resources of trust, resilience and cooperation can take root and replenish. It is ground, and a relationship, that has been critically neglected for too long.

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As the UK prepared to ease itself cautiously from its first Covid spring, the reverberations of a murder that shook America began to be felt on our shores, and in our towns and cities, too. The death of George Floyd, a black man from Minneapolis, beneath the knee of white police officer Derek Chauvin – just one in an atrociously long line of police killings of black men and women – ignited a global wave of Black Lives Matter protests that must mark the imperative to fight racial injustice, particularly in relation to the actions of our police agencies, as one of the most urgent and animating social causes of our time.

There are those who believe that the only way to reduce the harm caused by racially disproportionate and discriminatory policing is to reduce the power and reach of the police. Defund<sup>26</sup>. Contain. Constrain. Abolish<sup>27</sup> even. Strip back the police to their reactive, emergency, ‘core’ functions and instead spend our hard-earned tax revenue on more positive forms of social provision. In this country too, argue some, the police should come when they are called and do what only they can do, but otherwise stay out of our communities lest their coercive power corrodes the fabric of society<sup>28</sup>.

We should listen to these arguments carefully, not just because they show us how bad it has got, but because they make clear how hard we must work to build a credible alternative narrative, that is plausible to all our communities, and in all of our places. We do not want *warrior* cops<sup>29</sup>, with confrontational attitudes, on our streets and in our neighbourhoods, but instead, should we settle for a thinned-out cadre of impersonal

functionaries (however efficient and ‘procedurally just’ their conduct)? Or can we build and make credible a narrative of police as *guardians*? Police as protectors and enablers, arbitrators and conciliators, of *us*. Police who (to evoke the Peelian principles) *are* the people – and not just *any* people, but people *of* (if not *from*) *here*. Is it too utopian or nostalgic to imagine policemen and women who share something of the sense of place with those who call it home? Who understand what makes it safe and unsafe, can imagine how it *feels* to be rooted within it, and what *that* makes people *do*? We need police, in other words, who have the cultural competence to soften the sharp edges between *us* and *them*. Police agencies can, and should, recruit for this competency; but it can also be learned – with time and inclination and good will and respectful curiosity. It should be viewed as one of the most powerful assets that police can hold, and there are places where we must acknowledge that it is in significant deficit.

Tim Cresswell, professor of human geography and author of books on the concept of place, writes that “*place, at a basic level, is space invested with meaning, in the context of power*”<sup>30</sup>. In seeking to build and bolster police credibility and legitimacy, in all our diverse communities and unique places, we should begin by asking: what meanings do the police, as a potent source of brute and symbolic power, make plausible *here*? If we do not find comfortable answers, if there are places where we accept the need to change the context so that other meanings become possible, we must also recognise that this work must begin on the ground. Trust can be eroded by winds that cross continents and oceans, but maintenance and repair must be done at close quarters.

We should be clear on the need for a *new* narrative. The call to refocus and reinvest in the policing of place should not be mistaken for nostalgic restitution, either of a ‘Neighbourhood’ model that has had its heyday, or of something older. It must acknowledge today’s fiscal context as well as the complexity and multi-modality of our modern world. We should also accept that reform is unlikely to emerge from ‘evidence’ – we know what policing approaches oriented towards communities and localities can achieve, and what the barriers are to implementing them well<sup>31</sup> – but we should also be clear that the benefits will often be subtle, idiosyncratic, and achieved in the intricate marginal gains of applied local

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26 McHarris, P. and McHarris T. (2020) *No More Money for the Police*. *The New York Times* [online]. 30 May.

27 Purnell, D. (2020) *George Floyd could not breathe. We must fight police violence until our last breath*. *The Guardian* [online]. 27 May.

28 In a discussion paper for the Strategic Review of Policing in England and Wales, Loader (2020) argues that the vital contribution of police to security in a democracy should be as “*constrained, reactive, rights-regarding agencies of minimal interference and last resort repair*”. Loader, I. (2020) *Revisiting the Police Mission*. London: The Police Foundation.

29 Rahr, S. and Rice, S. (2015) *From Warriors to Guardians: Recommitting American Police Culture to Democratic Ideals*. Laurel: National Institute of Justice.

30 Cresswell *op. cit.* (p19).

31 Colover, S. and Quinton, P. (2018) *Neighbourhood Policing: impact and implementation*. College of Policing.

knowledge and community connection. As Professor Martin Innes and his colleagues put it, in concluding their reflections on a decade-long programme of research and observation: “*When discussing the evidence-base for something like Neighbourhood Policing, we are clear that not everything it delivers will be measurable*”<sup>32</sup>. But if this is the case, we need other ways of collating and concentrating the disparate knowledge, insight, and experience of those who know their place and are tracing its connections to resilience and safety – and then articulating and amplifying it into a compelling argument for change. Our ‘safety-making’ response to the ruptures of 2020 will need to be built from the ground up, but first we need to bring together the raw materials. We need to gather in the stories.

## 5. Narrative-based policing

The police are made of stories. There are stories that are meant to be stories – of Dixon and Morse and Tennison and Luther and the rest – and stories that are meant to be true: The Bobby on the Beat, The Thin Blue Line, The Long Arm of the Law. Both kinds contain a grain of reality along with much that is imagined, and both kinds (when told well) can help us figure out where we stand in a world that often feels unsafe and insecure and unjust.

The cops show up early in our story repertoires, chasing robbers on blues-and-twos, in the same nursery cohort as wolves and woodcutters, tooth fairies and bogeymen. But unlike the others, police get more real and relevant and complicated as we grow. By the time we are adolescent police myths surround us, ambient and dissonant, competing to be told in the part-seen and hear-said episodes of our proximate worlds: those sirens, that police stop, that flesh put in the way of that knife. That travesty. Those fraught, frightened voices from next door, again. Police stories offer meanings to all that madness.

Although we have a choice in which we tune to, we tend to stick to our guns because there is so much at stake. Our narratives of police can tell us we are safe (or sometimes that we are not), that we are part of something bigger (whether we like it or not) and that if something bad happens there is someone we can call on, to stand by us and make things right (or maybe that there isn’t, or they can’t, or they won’t). When they are shared, these myths become part of what defines our tribe; our police-stories-in-common give us something

we can trust in each other, or else they can set us apart and put us at odds. And like all stories they always happen *somewhere*: they are the stuff of local legends, but they can also help build strong societies or be the failing of states.

There is another more concrete way in which the police are made of stories because the police are also made of people, and the narratives that permeate a society determine which of its members aspire to become police officers, the prevailing archetype of ‘the good cop’ then dictates who among them gets recruited, before the canteen tales of their workmates and the ‘visions’ of their chiefs shape what kind of officers they become.

And, whether we like it or not the police are also made of policies, which can be summaries of stories, often with very simple morals: the police are inefficient, or unaccountable, or invisible; the police are for crime, or the vulnerable, or a crisis, or for everything. The police are heroic, the police are tragic, the police are racist, the police are plebs.

For all the talk of evidence-based policy making, the decisions that shape the kind of police we get can usually be traced back to synopses like these, and even where there *is* good data it needs to be told to be believed. The most influential leaders and politicians tend to be the best storytellers and the same goes for criminologists, reformers, disrupters and campaigners. Creating change means challenging the tired, old, incredible tales with stronger, deeper, more vibrant ones; with stories from a different place. If we want better policing, we need better stories. And we need a place to share them.

## 6. A resting place

We come to rest then, with the bones of an argument that is no longer being made. Bones exposed for fresh examination by the winds of social change unleashed in 2020 – particularly by the Covid-19 crisis – and still blowing strong. They amount to a contention that place still matters, especially in times of crisis, and matters more in the expanding and complexifying scheme of things than those professionally concerned with our safety have had space to acknowledge of late. It matters because places carry (perhaps even *are*) collections of message and meaning – both shared and personal – and that some of the strongest relate to whether we are safe and whether we belong. The modern world can turn us away from these parochial warnings and callings; today (thankfully), we can be more than our

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<sup>32</sup> Innes, M., Roberts, C., Lowe, T. and Innes, H. (2020) *Neighbourhood Policing: The Rise and Fall of a Policing Model*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (p.214)

immediate circumstances and must be wary of things we cannot touch, locate, and smell. But like misaligned magnets we are compelled to swing back; our true north inheres in the bedrock beneath our feet and ignoring its pull, because it is as old as we are and connects only to here, denies some of what it is to be whole modern people.

And, because place is (still) an important part of us, it needs to be an important part of our social public services, particularly those concerned with our safety and security. Local knowledge – of both the analytic, factual kind and the intimate, experiential kind – remains an indispensable resource for agencies whose core business is making safety. But so is relationship and trust. Like the neural connections of a brain, if we want a community to fire into effective action when it is threatened – for the organising, executive instructions to carry through and for the eyes and ears to provide essential feedback – then its enabling pathways need to be made ready and reinforced by practiced activation. It is *trust* that makes those synapses flow strong and fast; trust earned over time and accumulated in place.

If we knew there was going to be another Covid in five years' time – or better, if we knew there was going to be an unspecified civic crisis of equal weight and import, that touched us all and required each one of us to play our part – what would we do to prepare? The wisest thing we could do is invest in making our communities as agile and resilient as possible. In bringing people together, connecting them with bonds of trust and practiced cooperation, both to each other, and to all the knowledge, efficacy and organisational capacity possessed by the government services they pay for and elect.

For the police specifically, this runs deeper than cooperation and efficacy; it is about the consent and legitimacy that underwrites their very existence. For people to recognise the right of police to command their compliance, they must first be persuaded that those police *understand* what is in their interests and that they *have those interests at heart*. They need to be assured that, in the long run, police are there to protect, enable and repair, not stymie, harass, and repress, and that the decisions they make and the discretion they use, is informed by knowing the context. To trust someone is to know their motives and to be assured that they understand ours – and to know someone's motives is to understand *where they are coming from*. If police want us to respect their authority, they need to show us that they know our place.

Finally, we must think about how change happens. The argument is not being made because no one is listening anymore. Narratives of austerity and priority and modernity and unknown, unnerving risk have (so far) won the day. If we want to refocus attention on the connections between safety and place, and to build a compelling case for policing that is more deeply connected to communities and rooted in the places where we live, then we need to tell a different story. Financial, ideological, reputational investment will not be offered from above unless it is inspired and impelled from below. Evidence is important, but it needs a narrative horse to ride. There are visionary leaders, researchers and thinkers who can help to shape the new narrative, but there is also so much good being done in the cracks (in spite of it all) that we also need to put our ear to the ground. Where structures, resources, 'culture' and too many leaders with too little vision put up barriers, there are countless local heroes working around them and in between, who get it and get on with it. They are the neighbourhood bobby with a story for every street corner, the PCSO with a name for every face and thousands of leg-miles on the clock, they are the graduate recruit who hasn't yet seen it all and is all the better for it, they are the analyst who can see beneath the hotspot map, the community safety officer who understands that communities make safety, the volunteer and the youth worker, the campaigner and coordinator, the historian and steward and poet of place. Theirs are the stories that need to be shared, connected, combined, and amplified; to be heard beyond their places, so that they can inspire, engage, and empower others and provide the raw materials to craft the stories from which change is made.

*The Police Foundation is seeking support to develop and launch The Police in Place Project, a collaborative online resource and focal point for exploring the connections between safety and place and for building, sharing, and testing the arguments for a police service that is more deeply connected to communities, and rooted in the places where we live.*

*The author welcomes enquiries relating to this and the themes and ideas raised in this paper.*

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