



# POLICING IN PARTNERSHIP

THE  
POLICE  
FOUNDATION

The UK's policing think tank

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS  
IN TACKLING THEFT AND FRAUD

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# POLICING IN PARTNERSHIP: THE ROLE OF PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS IN TACKLING THEFT AND FRAUD

## About the Police Foundation

The Police Foundation is the only independent think tank focussed exclusively on improving policing and developing knowledge and understanding of policing and crime reduction. Its mission is to generate evidence and develop ideas which deliver better policing and a safer society. It does this by producing trusted, impartial research and by working with the police and their partners to create change.

## Acknowledgements

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## About the Sponsors



The Art Loss Register, The Watch Register and The Equipment Register were founded in 1990 as initiatives of the insurance industry and their clients. Their aim is to reduce theft and fraud by developing international searchable databases of stolen items which are checked by those buying, selling, financing or insuring in those sectors. All matches are followed up to recover lost assets, obtain intelligence and support the police, for whom the service is free. The group employs 100 staff operating globally and their services are unique.

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# FOREWORD

**Julian Radcliffe OBE, Chairman, The Art Loss Register.**

Public confidence in the police is essential to an orderly society and is easily lost if the police are seen to be unresponsive to the public's reasonable demands – whatever the resource or other constraints. This lack of confidence may lead to a dangerous spiral of failure to report crime in the belief that no action will be taken, a reduction in intelligence and cooperation, citizens taking the law into their own hands, and a reduction in society's confidence in legitimate government; law and order being the State's first and overriding priority.

To prevent this, it is essential that the police have the capability to respond to lower priority, non-violent crimes such as theft and fraud, even if the response is not wholly their own. Vital expertise, particularly in IT for many areas of crime, lies outside of the police and the private sector can

often act internationally more readily than national or regional police agencies.

But the private sector needs careful harnessing, hence our commissioning of this independent report and our strong support for its key recommendation:

**HMG should make it a goal to encourage partnerships between the police and the private sector, to tackle crimes like theft and fraud, and should establish a clear policy framework to facilitate such partnerships.**

We are grateful to The Police Foundation for their excellent research, and to the insurance industry which has backed many examples of these partnerships, operating with great success over many years.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

All societies need some form of policing. In order to prevent the kind of ‘dog eat dog’ world described by Thomas Hobbes in his *State of Nature*, societies need rules, and those rules require observation and enforcement. While policing can be seen as a threat to liberty, it is also a pre-condition for it. It is hard to see personal freedom flourishing in a world characterised by an absence of rules and order.

So, most people would accept that policing is necessary. Who should do that policing, however, has long been the subject of debate. While all countries today possess professional public police agencies, normally with a (near) monopoly on the lawful use of force, this was not always the case. Indeed prior to the foundation of modern professional policing in England in 1829, largely private and voluntary modes of policing predominated (Critchley, 1967).

The shift to the so-called ‘new police’ was intended to professionalise policing and reduce the corruption that had come to be seen as endemic in the feudal world of voluntary village constables.

And yet, if we fast forward to 2025, policing is now a highly diverse endeavour, with the public police always at the core, but with a growing range of private and voluntary actors involved in what academics have called ‘plural policing’. In almost any developed country today there are more private security guards than there are police officers. Most of the work done in tackling fraud, the single biggest modern crime type, takes place in financial institutions and telecommunication companies that generally act as the ‘first line of defence’ against such crimes. Having been thought to have been superseded by the Peelian model in the 1820s, private policing has in fact made a comeback.

In part, this reflects the growing complexity of modern crime. It is inconceivable that economic crimes like fraud and money laundering could be controlled without a significant role for banks and other financial institutions. It also reflects shifting

priorities within the public police, in particular a growing focus on violent and sexual crime, meaning that the police have less time to focus on acquisitive crimes like theft and fraud. In that gap, more and more private solutions have developed.

Despite the rise and necessity of forms of private policing in a complex society, the public police have had an *ad hoc* and ambiguous relationship with the private sector. This is based on a largely implicit assumption that organisations with a profit motive cannot be trusted with the task of policing. While understanding the sentiment, this paper will challenge that assumption.

The paper explores the role that private models of policing can play in promoting public safety, whether and how these forms of non-state policing can operate in partnership with the public police, and the challenges and opportunities created in doing so.

It comes in four sections:

1. It describes the evolution of private and public forms of policing since the 19th century.
2. It sets out some of the issues raised by the involvement of private bodies in policing activities.
3. It examines a set of case studies, focusing on the ways a range of private sector organisations are currently involved in tackling acquisitive crime, including various types of fraud and the theft of works of art, watches, agricultural equipment, bikes, mobile phones and cars.
4. It sets out some lessons that we can take from those case studies and makes a single public policy recommendation.

The paper is based on a review of academic literature on private sector involvement in policing and interviews with 10 practitioners involved in public private partnerships to tackle theft and fraud in the UK. Many of the principles, however, apply equally to other countries and there are foreseeable benefits, given the international nature of many crime types, in private partners pursuing public partnerships across multiple jurisdictions.





## 2. THE FALL AND RISE OF PRIVATE POLICING

Modern policing, in the British context, is defined by the ‘Peelian moment’. This came in 1829 when the Home Secretary Sir Robert Peel established the Metropolitan Police as the first major professional public police force in the world. Today we take it for granted that the core of any society’s police work is done by professional public agencies. But these public policing bodies are in fact just two hundred years old.

### 2.1 PEEL AND THE PUBLIC POLICE

Prior to Peel’s groundbreaking – and at the time controversial – reforms, policing in England was a largely private and voluntary arrangement, dominated by two institutions. One was the village constable, a public office generally occupied by a local dignitary. These constables possessed a range of common law powers and operated voluntarily, with little by way of training, and subject to almost no regulation or oversight. The other, bestowed by the 13th century Statute of Winchester, was the practice of ‘hue and cry’ by which communities could be rallied to apprehend a suspect: a form of legally sanctioned vigilantism (Critchley, 1967).

Peel’s great insight – which retains its force to this day – was that a complex industrial society could no longer police itself on the basis of a patchwork of voluntary and private arrangements, and that a functioning democracy required the public and impartial enforcement of the rule of law.

From the 1820s onwards, professional constabularies were established by parliament across the counties and boroughs of England and Wales, with a parallel process in Scotland. Public policing agencies also spread around the world, to the extent that all modern states now possess a public police institution. Everywhere, these public policing bodies tend to have a monopoly on the lawful use of force and control of core

state functions, such as criminal investigation and generalist emergency response.

Police historians have tended to see these developments positively, because of the assumption that public policing is oriented to the public good, whereas private policing is seen as serving partisan interests (Berg and Shearing, 2018).

### 2.2 PLURAL NETWORKED POLICING

That traditional narrative of the monopolistic and ‘civilising’ role of the public police came unstuck, however, in the latter decades of the twentieth century, when it becomes apparent that private policing was once again on the rise. To quote Professor Ian Loader:

*‘What we might call a shift from police to policing has seen the sovereign state – hitherto considered focal to both provision and accountability in this field – reconfigured as but one node of a broader, more diverse ‘network of power’.... Sure enough, this network continues to encompass the direct provision and supervision of policing by institutions of national and local government. But it now also extends – as we shall see – to private policing forms secured through government; to transnational police arrangements taking place above government; to markets in policing and security services unfolding beyond government; and to policing activities engaged in by citizens below government. We inhabit a world of plural, networked policing.’*

(Loader, 2000).

Loader helpfully distinguishes between four different dimensions of plural, networked policing:

- There has been a growth in forms of private policing secured *through government*, such as the employment of private security guards at government buildings or the use of private sector staff in police control rooms or custody suites.



- As a result of the cross-border nature of modern crime there has been an expansion of forms of transnational policing *above government*, including institutions such as Interpol and Europol, with much more intelligence sharing, judicial cooperation and even joint investigative work between countries.
- There has been the rise of forms of private policing *beyond government*, such as the expansion of the private security industry and the cyber security sector.
- There has been the emergence of policing *below government*, mainly represented by the rise of new forms of volunteering and community work with the aim of improving community safety. These forms include for example citizen street patrols or community speed watch groups.

This paper focuses on the first and third of these phenomena, but we should recognise that plural, networked policing is not only about the rise of private policing, but also the growth of volunteer policing and transnational policing.

It is worth highlighting some facts and figures that reinforce the point that a great deal of policing today is carried out by private sector bodies:

#### *Private security personnel now generally outnumber police officers in many, if not most, countries:*

- In South Africa the private security industry is worth approximately US\$4 billion and outnumbers the public police by approximately 3:1 (Berg and Shearing, 2018).
- In the US and Canada, the ratio of private security personnel to police shifted from 1:1 in the early 1980s to something like 3:1 and 2:1 respectively by the mid-1990s (White and Gill, 2013).
- In Britain, Jones and Newburn found that the shift was less radical, moving from just under, to just over 1:1 between the 1950s and 1990s (White and Gill, 2013). However, by 2024 the ratio had increased further to 2.65:1, with 450,000 people now holding a Security Industry Association (SIA) Licence, compared to 169,500 police officers (combining England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) (Guardian, 2025).

#### *The market for private investigators is growing:*

- In 2022 the global private investigation services market was valued at approximately \$18 billion and is projected to reach \$28 billion by 2032 (Fact MR, 2022).
- In the US, the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates a five per cent growth rate in private investigators between 2023 and 2033 (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025).

#### *The private cyber security sector has experienced rapid growth:*

- In 2021 organisations invested approximately \$150 billion in cybersecurity, with a 12 per cent annual growth rate. The market is projected to grow to \$298 billion by 2027 (Mitchell, 2024; Markets and Markets, 2024).

#### *The asset recovery industry is also growing:*

- The global asset recovery services market was valued at \$6.44 billion in 2022 and is estimated to rise to \$12 billion by 2030, with annual growth of 8.5 per cent over this period (Zion Market Research, 2022).

### **Explaining the rise of private policing**

What then explains the rise of private models of policing in recent decades? The first reason is that, from the 1980s onwards, a series of reforms took place – broadly characterised in the UK as ‘New Public Management’ – which sought to improve public sector efficiency, using private sector management techniques. These reforms were pioneered, of course, by the Thatcher government but sustained by her successors, and often involved contracting out elements of public service delivery to private companies.

While the public police were to some extent protected from the ‘out-sourcing revolution’ (in a way other parts of the public sector, such as local government, were not), there was some experimentation by individual police forces, with private companies (for example) being contracted to run police custody suites.

These experiments in private policing *through* government, (to use Loader’s term), reached their apotheosis in 2012 when a major deal was



signed between G4S and Lincolnshire Police. Under a ten-year contract, G4S provided services including running the force control room and Crime Management Bureau, firearms licensing, custody officers, IT and estates management. While the idea was to provide these functions more efficiently, the deal was later allowed to lapse by the Lincolnshire Police and Crime Commissioner, who thought there were more cost-effective alternatives (Lincolnshire World, 10th November 2020).

However, the rise of private policing in the UK has been less about private policing *through* government and more about the growth of private policing models *beyond* the state. The reason for this is the increased complexity and diversification of crime, alongside severe resource constraints on the public police.

The most significant factor in increasing the complexity and diversity of crime has been the digital revolution, which has created wholly new spaces in which crime can take place, and entirely new types of crime, such as computer misuse offences like hacking.

But this technology has also enabled older forms of crime to be carried out at low cost, on an industrial scale. The most obvious example is fraud, which is now the largest single crime type experienced by adults in England and Wales, affecting around four million people a year (Office for National Statistics, 2025), many of whom are lured into parting with their money through emails and social media advertisements, or into paying for non-existent goods on online auction sites, or being coaxed into fake romantic relationships on social media sites.

But digital technology enables other crimes too, such as online child sexual abuse, perpetrated by networks of sex offenders operating globally and able to reach large numbers of co-offenders at the click of a button.

In response to the rise of online crime, the private sector has had to invest in its own defences. This means that almost every large business needs to engage with the growing market in cyber security services, offering protection from attack. Every bank must now have its own counter fraud and anti-money laundering provision, (both to prevent losses and, in the case of money laundering, to

prevent large fines from regulators). Social media platforms deploy both humans and artificial intelligence to surveil and ‘police’ their platforms for activities such as promoting violent extremism and sharing child sexual abuse imagery.

Indeed, it is worth stating that while the internet and digital ubiquity have been major enablers of crime, they have also provided actors beyond the state (both private and voluntary) with many of the tools to control crime independently of it. One example would be so-called ‘paedophile hunters’ who pose as children on social media sites to identify online child sex offenders. This is an area where the public police are limited in the resources they can dedicate to proactive work, and so a form of ‘cyber vigilantism’ has arisen to fill the gap.

Which brings us to another spur for the rise of private policing: the resource constraints on the public police. Policing has always been rationed. The police have never investigated every crime reported to them and they are not able to respond to every call for assistance or patrol every street. Demand for policing has always outstripped what the public police are able to supply. However, the situation in Britain became particularly acute in the 2010s when the police budget was cut radically by the David Cameron’s Conservative-led government, with 20,000 police officers being lost over the decade (Police Foundation, 2022).

As a result of austerity, the police had to further ration what they did and they chose, (understandably and inevitably), to prioritise investigation of high harm offences and those involving vulnerable people. This meant that the police criminal investigation function was steered overwhelmingly toward sexual and violent crime. By default, this has meant that acquisitive crime, including most theft and fraud, has been substantially de-prioritised.

This, in turn, has provided a spur for greater private sector involvement in tackling these offences, which were simply never going to be prioritised by cash-strapped police forces. In areas as diverse as art theft, motor vehicle finance crime and theft from tractors, a whole range of private initiatives have taken off, often in partnership with – but sometimes in tension with – the public police. We explore ten such case studies in section 4.



# 3. THE ISSUES RAISED BY THE RISE OF PRIVATE POLICING

As mentioned already, there has been a somewhat ambiguous relationship between the public police and the new forms of private policing that have emerged in recent years. This is, in part, because of many legitimate concerns that arise from the private provision of policing functions. In this section we set out those concerns and then turn to some of the ways they can be addressed.

## 3.1 CONCERNS ABOUT PRIVATE POLICING

### Private motives versus the public interest

Probably the most significant concern expressed about the role of private sector bodies in the provision of public service relates to the profit motive, which is inevitably a factor in private sector decision-making, and which may be in tension with what is in the public interest. This is particularly the case in policing, which forms part of our system of criminal justice, and where the police are required to make decisions fairly and impartially. The partiality of private interests can therefore seem inimical to some of the core tasks of policing.

### Inequality

A second concern about the rise of private policing is described by Loader and White in the following way:

*'Unequal buying power not only means that the rich enjoy privileged access to the market but also that security resources are often distributed in inverse relation to risk. Commodifying security into discrete goods tailored to individual, community, and organizational preferences chips away at the trust and solidarity required to guarantee equal protection for all members of society...For these reasons, the global market for security services and technologies stands in tension with the democratic promise of modern security – the idea that all members of a political community have a stake in, and merit equal consideration when determining the protective arrangements of that community.'*

(Loader and White, 2017)

Whereas the promise of public policing is a service available to all citizens (or at least one subject to democratic prioritisation), private security markets operate on the basis that security is a commodity that can be bought and sold. Those with the deepest pockets are able to purchase the greatest security.

Concern about this occasionally manifests in public debate when wealthy communities offer to pay for supplementary police patrols in their areas. Such proposals have tended to be refused on the grounds that it would unfairly distort police resources, which ought to be allocated on the basis of need not the ability to pay.

### Trust and solidarity

As Loader and White make clear, there is a connected concern that, as more of policing is provided by the private sector, this will undermine the relationships between the public and the police. Core to the Peelian model of policing is the notion that 'the public are the police, and the police are the public'. That relationship rests on trust: the public need to trust that the police will treat them fairly and impartially. If a private motive is introduced into this dynamic, then that degree of interpersonal trust may be corroded.

### Fragmentation

Policing is a form of risk management and the ability of the police to appropriately manage the many risks that come to their attention is dependent on the information available to them. Intelligence in the right hands at the right time, can enable better policing decisions.

A final concern about the rise of private policing is the worry that, in pluralising and parcelling up policing services into individually purchased silos, those intelligence flows start to break down. Indeed, as we shall see when discussing the role of the private sector in tackling fraud, one of the biggest challenges is data sharing across different public and commercial entities.



This is not an argument against private policing *per se*, but it does require us to consider how, in a more plural policing system, we ensure data and intelligence collected by one actor can be appropriately shared with others to enable an effective response.

## 3.2 OPPORTUNITIES AND MITIGATING FACTORS

These concerns need to be balanced against some equally legitimate reasons why private bodies *should* be part of the wider policing landscape:

### **The private sector brings skills and resources the public police lack**

Probably the strongest argument for a role for the private sector in contributing to safety and security is that the public police on their own simply cannot provide the level or range of service that is needed. As we shall see when we look at the case studies in the next section, if the private sector did not step up to the plate and either fund or provide supplementary policing in areas of theft and fraud, then these things would simply never happen. The public police are never going to prioritise art theft over sex crime, for example. But surely *somebody* should be seeking to control art theft.

In addition, the private sector can bring skills that the police themselves lack. We can see that, for example, with the advanced data analytics that banks and other financial institutions are able to mobilise to tackle fraud.

### **The private sector generates innovation**

As we shall see in the case studies below, private entrepreneurs are often able to spot a new way of doing things, and are able to get it off the ground, in a way the police themselves would struggle to do. So, for example, the development of a register of lost and stolen mobile phones, using the unique IMEI identifier of each phone, is a solution to the problem of preventing and detecting mobile phone theft, that came from outside policing, but is now a core part of police business.

### **The private sector can provide data**

So much of modern crime takes place in spaces, often digital spaces, owned and managed by the private sector. Tackling these forms of crime would be impossible without private sector data sharing. How could the police tackle fraud without the data made available to them by the financial services sector? It would simply be impossible. Maximising appropriate data sharing between the police and private sector institutions should be a core component of any strategy to reduce crime.

There are also some mitigating factors that can help to address the concerns set out above:

### **The private sector role should be supplemental to the core functions of the public police**

Many of the concerns expressed about private policing possess most of their power if one were making the argument that the public police should be *replaced* by private provision. In a society with a strong core of public policing, concerns around inequality and an erosion of trust in particular should be less pertinent. In a world where most of the core policing functions – such as criminal investigation, neighbourhood patrol and emergency response – are the monopoly of the public police, having private operators provide supplemental support should cause fewer concerns.

### **The private sector should be subject to regulation**

Concerns about the motivations of private actors are understandable but require appropriate nuance. As White and Gill (2013) convincingly show through empirical research, the idea that the public police are purely publicly spirited whereas the private sector are focused only (or mainly) on profits is a caricature. White and Gill found many operators in the private security sector with strong public service motivations. We also know that not every police officer is motivated wholly by a desire to serve.

The key question, as Loader (2000) argues, is how to ensure that these private markets beyond policing *operate in the public interest*. And, as with

other sectors, that is the reason for appropriate regulation of private security markets.

### **The public police and the private sector should work in partnership**

Rather than thinking about the relationship between the two sectors as at odds or antagonistic, there is plenty of space for them to work collaboratively, bringing their different skills and resources to bear, for mutual benefit. Indeed, in the next section we provide several examples where the private sector is providing resources and data that enable the police to tackle thefts and fraud that they would otherwise simply be unable to deal with.





# 4. CASE STUDIES

In this section we describe ten case studies, each of which illustrates some of the challenges and opportunities involved in private provision of policing, and in building effective partnerships, between the police and the private sector. Each of these cases is focused on UK efforts to tackle theft and fraud, precisely the types of crime that the public police alone have struggled to prioritise in recent years.

## 4.1 LOST AND STOLEN PROPERTY REGISTERS

Four of our cases are examples of property registers: private crime control initiatives that aim to help property owners recover lost and stolen goods, while also helping to prevent theft by deterrent property registration.

### The Art Loss Register

The Art Loss Register (ALR) was founded in 1990 as a joint initiative between insurers, reputable art dealers and the world's top auction houses, with the aim of preventing the circulation of stolen artefacts in the art market. It is majority owned by its founder, Julian Radcliffe, with Sotheby's and Christie's as minority shareholders.

The ALR has compiled the world's most comprehensive database of lost and stolen artworks. By July 2020 it had 700,000 objects in its database, and is constantly updated by data from Interpol, industry associations and insurance records. Victims of loss or theft can also register their property via ALR.

Anyone can pay to search the register if they can provide the required details of the artefact they are looking for. If a match is confirmed both the searcher and the owner are informed. If theft is suspected, the police are contacted.

Dealers and auction houses subscribe to the ALR so that they can reassure customers that they can purchase art works in good faith.

As Anja Shortland, in an excellent study of the ALR, puts it: *'Co-production of crime control between the public and private sector in the art market ... makes political and economic sense. Police forces allocate resources to pursue the most egregious cases of art crime. Wealthy art collectors who need additional law enforcement can*

*choose to employ private providers to augment public provision paid from general taxation. The ALR is just one of many companies that have stepped in to fill the manifold enforcement gaps in the art market.'*

(Shortland, 2021).

The ALR makes art theft less attractive by increasing the likelihood of detection. It helps to reunite owners with much loved artefacts that often have incalculable personal value. It helps keep insurance premiums lower than they would otherwise be by reducing losses. It has also changed norms in the art market, making it more transparent and law abiding. It is a private initiative that is, to quote Shortland again *'without doubt in the public interest.'*

One concern that the ALR potentially raises is its dominance as a provider. It is essentially in a monopoly position, which poses challenges for the police who are cautious about bringing accused of privileging individual providers. But the truth is, in Shortland's words, *'The art world needs just one database that is as complete and reliable as possible'* (Shortland, 2021). Such monopolies can serve the public interest, depending on how they operate and how they are regulated.

### The Watch Register

Manufacturers of luxury watches have for years restricted the supply of watches to maintain exclusivity and increase demand. This has created long waiting lists for desirable models, and driven consumers to the pre-owned market where the same watches are available for purchase immediately. As a result, secondary market prices have shot up and the pre-owned market is growing rapidly. This has incentivised criminals to target luxury watches as part of organised robbery, money-laundering and fraud schemes.

The Watch Register was founded by the ALR in 2014 as a dedicated database of stolen watches, recording the brand, model name and serial number. This makes it possible for dealers to consult the database before buying, servicing or repairing watches. If a stolen watch is located, efforts can be made to return it to the rightful owner or insurers and to notify law enforcement (Shortland, 2021).

Details of lost and stolen watches are provided by members of the public, insurance companies and the police. The Watch Register team also proactively search for details of watches from publicly reported crimes.

Today, The Watch Register holds 110,000 records and processes 250,000 searches a year on the global market, with one in every 200 searches resulting in a match (The Watch Register, 2025). Where matches are made, The Watch Register offers a recovery service on a 'no win, no fee' basis.

The Watch Register also has a strong partnership with the public police. It provides its services free of charge to all police forces. Because of the high levels of watch theft in London, the Register works particularly closely with the Metropolitan Police Flying Squad. The Watch Register now receives all of the Met's stolen watch data, which amounts to over 270,000 stolen watches, dating back thirty years. 185 stolen watches were located by The Watch Register for the Metropolitan Police in the first year of this formal partnership (2024) with a total value exceeding £550,000.

Both the ALR and The Watch Register databases have contracts with searchers, which require them to have a genuine interest in the item being searched for (e.g. as a buyer, financier, insurer etc.), to be fully identified, and, in the event of a match, to cooperate in the return of the item to its legal owner. This prevents searchers responding to a match by merely declining to buy the item, in which case the seller may just take it away, preventing recovery. The additional follow up work involved in this recovery, requires significant expertise and expense, but is often critical to gaining proof of criminal behaviour, gathering further intelligence and returning items to their owners.

### **BikeRegister**

Bike theft is a common crime, but for all the reasons discussed above, it is generally not one prioritised by the police. BikeRegister represents a commercial attempt to help people recover lost and stolen bikes, help the police identify and investigate crime, and prevent theft in the first place. The company offers a cycle marking service which links bikes to the database. It currently has 1.4 million bikes registered and 1.2 million individual users, although there is considerable scope for increasing registrations, particularly at point-of-sale.

There is a good partnership between BikeRegister and the police. The organisation provides the police with free access to the database, so that they can check the ownership of bikes they may come across. They also provide training to police forces in how to do bike marking.

Some police forces have been particularly proactive. For example, Merseyside Police noted that 80 per cent of their local street robberies involved the use of a bike or e-bike. The force carried out stops and searches on suspects and checked their bikes against the database, identifying numerous stolen bikes and using that information to act against potential robbers.

The BikeRegister's parent company also uses its marking products to provide a similar system for registering tools.

While not the only bike registration system in existence, BikeRegister is the largest and has extensive police endorsement. The case for having a single recognised supplier is considered in the concluding section.

### **Immobilise.com**

Immobilise.com is a property ownership register which includes a function to mark any item as lost or stolen. It was formed after its founder lost his mobile phone on the London Underground. When he attended TFL's lost property to report the loss, he was asked for his IMEI number to identify his phone among the thousands in their possession, but had no prior knowledge of an IMEI number – a unique global identification number, which means lost or stolen phones can be identified and potentially (if registered) returned to their owners.

Immobilise.com has over 20 million registrants and over 40 million pieces of registered property. It is searched over 60 million times each year thanks to its links with police, insurance and the second-hand trade. Users can register their property in advance, as a crime prevention measure, or retrospectively once it has gone missing.

The company that owns Immobilise.com, Recipero, has a strong working relationship with UK police forces, providing the National Mobile Property Register (NMPR) to over 60 law enforcement agencies. The result is that if the police encounter your property, registration on Immobilise maximises your chances of getting it back.

Immobilise.com registration is free to consumers (and does not sell registrant data), police and law enforcement agencies pay a fixed annual fee to cover the cost of the NMPR. Recipero makes its profit from CheckMEND and ClaimsCheck, services provided to businesses and insurers (respectively), to help them avoid buying stolen goods or paying out on fraudulent claims.

A representative of Recipero told us that there were two things that could be done to make the database even more effective. First, more people could be encouraged to be aware of their phone's IMEI number and to register it at Immobilise.com. Second, the police could systematically check the IMEI numbers of phones belonging to detainees in police custody (as happens in some, but not all forces) to identify whether they are stolen.

## 4.2 PRIVATELY FUNDED POLICE UNITS

What should an industry do when it is suffering serious losses owing to theft and fraud, but those offences are simply not prioritised by the public police? The answer, in the case studies below, is simple: pay for a dedicated police unit.

### **The Insurance Fraud Enforcement Department (IFED)**

IFED was established in 2012 with a mission to work with criminal justice partners to address the types of high volume, organised fraud, often seen as low-risk, high-reward by criminals. It reflects a recognition that the police themselves would simply never be able to prioritise insurance fraud, whose biggest direct victims are large insurance companies whose moral claim to police assistance would simply never be as great as victims of high harm crime. In that context, the Association of British Insurers (ABI) agreed to fund a dedicated unit of detectives based in the City of London Police, focused on tackling insurance fraud. The concept and funding model for the private/public collaboration are globally unique, and bring benefits for law enforcement, consumers, industry and society.

The rationale for creating IFED was two-fold: to recover losses through crime detections and prosecutions, and to create a disincentive to commit these kinds of fraud, by making it clear that potential fraudsters could be caught.

According to the City of London Police, since its inception, IFED has investigated insurance fraud worth a total value of £381 million. Officers have conducted 3,364 arrests and voluntary attendance interviews. The unit has secured 697 convictions and prison sentences totaling 355 years. It has a team of 51 people and has around 270 investigations running at any one time.

IFED also provides significant extra capacity and capability for the City of London Police's wider national fight against economic crime, for example by providing short-term resource to respond to major challenges, such as terrorist incidents, and equipping the force with a broader range of skills and career progression and development opportunities.

The criticisms of the use of private money to support a public police unit of this kind are worth exploring. First, it is said that this may distort the priorities of the public police, by essentially allowing large businesses to buy their own police. It is worth stressing, however, that the unit is *additional* to the core work of City of London Police and, more than that, if the unit was not

funded by industry, then literally no one in the police would be investigating insurance fraud.

Second, there are concerns that by having police funded directly by industry, this may damage the impartiality and fairness of the police. When this was put to IFED, they were clear that all their operational decisions are taken according to objective criteria and that the principle of the operational independence of the police applies to their work, just as it does to the relationship between the police and senior politicians. So, for example, IFED are clear that they investigate cases of all kinds and not those only involving members of the ABI, which funds them.

### **National Construction and Agricultural Theft Team (NCATT)**

NCATT is another dedicated police unit that is almost entirely privately funded to focus on crime types that would never be prioritised at the police force level. Plant and agricultural equipment theft has been rising in the UK, owing to factors including the war in Ukraine and the illicit market that it has created for such machinery. In order to tackle this problem, the big insurers in the agricultural and construction sectors (NFU Mutual and the Construction Equipment Association) came together to fund NCATT.

NCATT say that, since their foundation, they have seized £25 million worth of equipment including recovering over £600,000 in 2023 for one insurer alone. They employ a range of dedicated staff including a financial investigator, a livestock theft investigator and (previously) a fly tipping officer funded by DEFRA. They highlighted that agricultural and construction machinery theft is driven by well organised crime gangs that operate at regional, national and international level, some of which are also involved in other rural crime activities, such as hare coursing.

Referring to the niche in which they operate, they argued that the types of cases they investigate require a national unit because they cross local and national borders. They also provide a level of capacity and capability that is increasingly unavailable in mainstream policing, where cases are often considered to be outside of force control strategies or 'too big for a force and too small for a Regional Organised Crime Unit'.

While agricultural and construction equipment that is licensed to operate on public roads have a registration plate number, against which the DVLA will record theft reports. This does not apply to tractors which only operate on farms/quarries, or to trailers/ equipment which are not prime movers. This is where the industry's CESAR scheme



(run by the Construction Equipment Association) is crucial: NCATT have a 100% success rate in identifying a stolen machine that has been fitted with the CESAR technology. Both CESAR and the Equipment Register maintain databases of stolen items enabling due diligence checking for buyers, finance companies and the police.

### **The National Vehicle Crime Intelligence Service (NaVCIS)**

NaVCIS was established in the early 2010s to tackle another niche area of acquisitive crime: vehicle finance crime. Vehicle finance crime encompasses various illegal activities related to acquiring or using vehicles through finance agreements, including fraud, theft, and mis-selling. The service, which sits within the NPCC Vehicle Crime Portfolio, coordinates the police response to such crimes, conducting investigations and providing specialist support to local forces – including liaising with tracking companies to find better ways of recovering stolen vehicles, providing specialist ports capability and training, and advice in areas such as caravans, motorhomes and mobile homes. It has become a national centre of information and expertise on vehicle crime and an important interface between industry and law enforcement. NaVCIS also hosts the police national freight-crime desk, sponsored by the freight industry, and promotes crime prevention activities for the finance industry and others.

NaVCIS is entirely privately funded by the Finance and Leasing Association. It estimates that it has recovered £70 million in losses since it was launched. Again, NaVCIS noted that it was filling an important gap because *‘vehicle crime is not going to get attention from the NCA and ROCUs’*. The recent creation of the National Vehicle Crime Reduction Partnership (NVCRP), jointly funded by Home Office and industry partners, represents an important further development in this area.

### **Dedicated Card and Payment Crime Unit (DCPCU)**

The DCPCU is a national police investigation unit that is funded by a consortium of organisations who are members of UK Finance, a not-for-profit trade association for banking and financial services (to the tune of approximately £3.3 million annually). It is funded to target and investigate criminals who perpetrate fraud affecting UK Finance members from the payments, banking and finance industries, with a particular focus on targeting the organised criminals engaged in these crimes. In this way, it serves the interests of financial services companies but also individuals who are victims of identity fraud. The unit brings police and private industry intelligence together to develop an understanding of fraud in this context. A more recent initiative is to use funds seized from fraudsters to expand the DCPCU and create a new cyber investigations team to detect and disrupt cybercriminal networks linked to financial fraud (Lloyds Banking Group, 2021).

Since its inception in 2002 the DCPCU has achieved industry savings of approximately £750 million through preventing and disrupting fraud. In 2023, 149 people were arrested or interviewed under caution, of which 68 were convicted. The operation recovered 24,288 compromised card numbers from active criminals.

## **4.3 DATA SHARING PARTNERSHIPS TO TACKLE FRAUD**

Beyond the provision of funding for dedicated policing units, the UK possesses a number of data sharing partnerships to tackle fraud, in an area where the private sector arguably plays a more important role in crime control than the public police.

### **Action Fraud data-sharing partnerships**

This is a long-term collaboration between the police and two large not-for-profit trade associations (Cifas and UK Finance) that manage platforms which allow their member organisations to share intelligence on suspected fraudulent actors or entities and help prevent fraud. It brings together members from a range of sectors, the most prominent being key financial service providers such as banks and payment services. These trade associations submit all reports of fraud to Action Fraud. These reports are incorporated into national crime and intelligence data and statistics. This augments the national strategic perspective on fraud offending, and operationally, creates opportunities for criminal investigation. Law enforcement can also submit requests to Cifas for intelligence to assist with criminal investigations into suspects engaged in organised crime and money laundering.

### **The Banking Protocol**

The most serious frauds often target vulnerable victims who are deceived for prolonged periods of time and suffer significant financial losses before realising they are a victim of fraud. This initiative leverages personnel in retail banking to identify and assess suspicious behaviours from customers that indicate they are a victim of fraud (e.g. attempts to withdraw or transfer large sums of money). This helps to detect hidden fraud, hidden victims and prevent financial losses. Banking personnel contact the police to share the intelligence and request they visit the branch to engage with the customer. This quick-time response to fraud in action also creates opportunities to collect further intelligence to detect and trace the criminals involved.

In a three-year period, this initiative helped prevent over £200 million in fraud and has resulted in hundreds of arrests, including the disruption of major criminal networks (UK Finance, 2019).

# 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

In this paper we have reviewed how the relationship between public and private policing has evolved in Britain since the 19th century. We have found that the complexity of modern society, the spread of digital technology and the resource constraints on public policing have led to the rise of private methods of crime control. While private policing poses a number of normative challenges, when seen as a supplement to, and a partner of the public police, it has an important role to play. Indeed, we have reviewed a set of case studies that demonstrate not only that private policing initiatives can act in the public interest to tackle crime, but that without them, it is unlikely that we will be able, as a society, to tackle the range and complexity of the crime types we currently face.

In this final section we set out some conclusions based on all of the above and make one single, but vital, policy recommendation.

## 5.1 KEY INSIGHTS

We make the following key insights on the basis of this study.

### 1. Private crime control initiatives are a necessary supplement to the core role of the public police

The role of the public police is essential. Peel was right: in a complex society we need a professional public police service, and, in a functioning democracy buttressed by the rule of law, we need an impartial public policing institution with a monopoly on the lawful use of force. That institution must be responsible for the core functions of modern policing: criminal investigation, neighbourhood policing and generalist emergency response. That police institution needs to be accountable and transparent and the people who work for it must be well trained and operate to the highest standards. If it does that, it can be the trusted anchor at the heart of a Peelian model of policing by consent.

However, the inevitable resource constraints on that public police, mean that it cannot plausibly meet all of the demands placed upon it. Moreover, the digital revolution has opened up vast new arenas of crime and harm, in which the public police are often not well placed to lead the response. If we are to develop an effective response to lower-priority acquisitive crimes of the kinds examined here, the private sector must play an important supplemental role.

### 2. Private initiatives can act in the public interest

It is wrong to caricature the motivations of actors on either side of the public/private sector divide. In the course of this research, we have encountered many private sector actors who are motivated by a desire to help the police tackle crime and to serve the public good.

Of course, any sector, (including those within the public sector), requires regulation to ensure that the overall policing system is acting in the public interest. Effective regulation of private security provision and crime control is therefore critical.

### 3. Monopoly provision is sometimes in the public interest

One of the challenges private operators sometimes have is that the police feel nervous about entering into agreements, such as data sharing partnerships, with a single company. While all of these markets should, in principle, be open to new private challengers, in some cases it actually makes sense for there to be a single dominant provider. In the case of lost and stolen property registers, they are most effective if they host as much data and intelligence as possible. It would not make sense to have two or three art loss registers, for instance.

In these cases of natural monopoly, the police should be comfortable with developing partnerships that are in the public interest.

#### 4. The operational independence of the police applies equally to their relationship with private companies as it does to elected politicians.

The police in this country are rightly operationally independent from the executive. Police officers are public officials who swear an oath of loyalty to the monarch, and essentially to the state, not to the government of the day. We rightly want police officers to make decisions about the use of their powers free from political interference.

The same applies when police units are funded privately. Those private funders may help to shape the overall strategic priorities of the units they support, but they should not be involved in operational decisions, which should be made independently, without fear or favour.

#### 5. There can be positive externalities from private initiatives to tackle lower-level crimes

While the initiatives described in this paper might seem quite niche, actually they have important spillover effects into other areas. We saw how maintaining a register of lost and stolen mobile phones can help the police identify missing persons or solve much more serious crimes. We saw how targeting organised crime groups involved in large scale equipment theft, can help disrupt the other criminal activities they undertake. And we saw how maintaining a unit dedicated to tackle insurance fraud provides the host force with additional capacity, skills and development opportunities.

Just because these initiatives can seem niche does not mean they cannot play a role that is beneficial to wider efforts to reduce crime and harm.

#### 6. Data sharing is at the heart of effective partnerships between the public and private policing sectors.

Policing is, in many ways, a risk management business. It is about assessing threat, risk and harm and allocating a policing resource to manage those things, with the aim of keeping the public as safe as possible. As such, information is the currency of the exercise. The right information in

the right hands at the right time can allow for the most effective management of risk.

The success of all the case studies explored in this paper is dependent on effective data sharing between the private sector and the public police. Lost and stolen property registers are only effective if they can rely on a constant stream of intelligence from the public, from insurers and from the public police. Tackling fraud, most of which takes place in spaces owned and managed by private institutions such as social media companies and banks, requires extensive data sharing so that prevention, disruption and investigation can be properly targeted.

Nevertheless, there are still cultural barriers to sharing data between the police and the private sector and between different private companies. Overcoming these and reviewing data protection legislation should be a priority if we want to encourage more effective public private partnerships in policing.

### 5.1 A RECOMMENDATION

Normally a policy paper like this would end with a long list of recommendations for government. Instead, we make one single but vital recommendation.

*The government should make it a goal to encourage partnerships between the police and the private sector, to tackle crimes like theft and fraud and should establish a clear policy framework to facilitate such partnerships.*

We have identified some excellent innovative practice in this paper, but the one major barrier is the *ad hoc* nature of police engagement with private operators seeking to tackle crime. Where there are effective partnerships, these operate without a policy framework, often based on good personal relationships. There remains ambiguity about these partnerships and how they should operate, largely because the police feel they lack 'top cover' in developing them.

So, our recommendation is that the Home Office should send a clear signal that such partnerships should be promoted and should put a framework



in place that sets out the high-level terms of engagement, building on the insights described above.

It is clear that if we are to tackle crimes like theft and fraud in a context marked by resource constraint and digital transformation, the public police need to work in partnership with private and other actors to do so. Tackling these crime types requires a collaborative effort from all the parts of the plural policing landscape. Only by working together can we tackle these crimes and the criminals who commit them.



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