Policing performance

Barry Loveday describes the effects of performance targets on police culture.

As with other public agencies the police service has had to accomadate to the increasing demands of 'managerialism' in the delivery of service.With the comprehensive application of performance measurement and vaunted 'performance indicators,' police forces are now subject to a range of measurements of efficiency and effectiveness which provide league tables, for very public consumption, of the good and the bad. The Home Office, Audit Commission and Police Authorities are now all heavily involved in monitoring police activity which has been re-affirmed by 'New' Labour as the most effective way of improving performance. Additionally all police forces are now heavily engaged in the search for 'Best Value' which has again encouraged detailed examination of current service delivery.

This has of course been reaffirmed most recently by the Home Secretary's Feburary announcement of individual five year crime reduction targets for police forces. Implemented by way of the *Police and Magistrates Courts Act 1994* these only provide further confirmation of the centralist features of this legislation which gives the Home Office the power by way of Key Performance Indicators to significantly influence what police forces do and, more important perhaps, what they don't do. So, irrespective of local crime strategies developed under the Crime and Disorder legislation, police forces will be required to address car crime and burglary achieving a reduction in the latter of 25% by 2005 while also cutting car crime by 30% over the same period. Metropolitan forces have also been told to substantially reduce the robbery rate in their respective force areas.

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The Government's Strategic Plan

This very mechanistic approach to policing and 'crime control' was regularly denounced when pursued by the late and unlamented Conservative Government. It has, however, been enshrined in the Home Office 1999 *Strategic Plan for the Criminal Justice System* where a range of quite remarkable performance measures and targets have been set for all of the agencies within it (Home Office 1999). Here it is intended that, inter-alia, the long-run rate of the growth of crime, the level of disorder and fear of crime are to be reduced in each case by a set date, (in most cases by the 31st of March 2002, for those that might need to know).

This is not the place to evaluate the implications and possible consequences of current Government plans to 'systematise' a criminal justice ' process' which is best described as fractious and within which there remains a singular lack of shared 'goals'. It might however be appropriate to re-emphasise the very limited influence that this 'system' can be expected to have over crime rates or long term trends in crime. The need for caution has been emphasised by the most recent crime statistics produced by the Home Office. These suggest that predictions made by Simon Field in his 1998 'revisit' of *Trends in Crime* will be ignored by Government at its peril (Field 1998). As Field was to note, any increase in the total number of young males between the age of 15 and 20 could, for example, be expected to impact on recorded rates of both theft and burglary. There also appears to be long term 'equilibrium' level of crime identified by Field but which has been confirmed by other researchers who have sought to explore the long term link between crime and economic growth.

It is, of course, highly unlikely that this research will lead to the Home Secretary questioning his commitment to the crime reduction targets he has now set for the police. It remains the case, however, that how they try to achieve those targets will continue to be of interest .This is particularly so for the police service which, historically, has had to live with recorded crime rates as a major (and highly misleading) indicator of its overall efficiency.

Introducing performance culture

One managerial initiative directed towards the police to encourage them to achieve their targets, emanated from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC). The adoption of a 'performance culture' by police forces would, it believed, enable them to better achieve the multiple performance targets set for them by a growing number of monitoring bodies. As with much else, the encouragement of this management style was ostensibly designed to improve the effectiveness of police services. Such indeed was the importance attached to performance culture by HMIC that it was to look for evidence of this 'culture' during force inspections, identifying it as a major factor in enabling police to achieve performance targets set for them.

In 1998, for example, HMIC, in reporting on two police forces was to refer to the way 'the

performance culture' had impacted on police efficiency. In its report on Northamptonshire, HMIC was to suggest that the fall in recorded crime was attributable to the adoption of this 'culture', as was an improving detection rate. In its 1997 Report on Dyfed, Powy's HMIC was to comment favourably on the existence of a 'performance culture at all levels,' which apparently explained the 'exceptional performance' in crime detection. Nowhere in either reports was reference made, unfortunately, to the national reduction in recorded crime of nine percent which was identified within the 1997 annual crime statistics that year.

The significance ascribed by HMIC et al to 'performance culture' might, it could be thought, have been undermined by the discovery through Force inspections that only rarely were 'junior' officers ever consulted about objective setting or the development of policing plans within the organisation. While HMIC were usually satisfied about the degree and level of participation at 'the higher levels' they often received the impression that this did not extend down to the lower ranks. That was rather unfortunate, if only because, as service deliverers, the lower ranks were (and remain) precisely those who actually determine whether the force achieves set targets. Reporting on Kent County Constabulary, in 1998, HMIC was to comment unfavourably on the fact that there was little evidence of junior staff being actively consulted on performance issues. Nor was there a 'staff suggestion scheme' in operation in Kent. This decision was made by senior managers on the grounds that 'the value of the suggestions made would be unlikely to justify the expense.'

Despite the often resolute determination of senior police managers not to consult with the lower ranks about policing objectives it is also clear that the explicit identification both internally and externally of performance targets for police forces is having a noticeable effect on what they do. Here it is interesting to bear in mind the Home Secretarys' determination within the 1999 Strategic Plan to capture 'reliable data' upon which to measure performance. As argued within that document, the 'new performance approach' required reliable statistical data to set targets which otherwise would 'lack credibility' as a spur to improvement.

This not surprisingly may be seen as a direct challenge to police forces which have traditionally managed and massaged crime figures for a variety of quite understandable reasons. The techniques have been well described by Malcolm Young in his 1991 study of policing and police culture (Young 1991). As this former police officer was to argue, depending on the demands and expectations of the time, crime recording (and clearance) could rise or fall with a remarkable uniformity across police forces. Misclassification, 'cuffing' and the not infrequent use of 'file13' (the waste paper basket), for offences identified as 'dead and unsolvable' were just some ways of exercising control over the recorded crime rate. Similarly the frequent use of 'prison visit' teams or 'clear up' squads established by most forces were also very useful in substantially improving crime clearance rates.

Given the demands of performance targets, particularly in relation to specific offences, it is interesting to discover how police forces are setting about achieving them. For some commentators the adoption by police of new crime strategies explains recent reductions in recorded offences. For these policing is now apparently experiencing a 'fundamental transformation' on a global level (Maguire 2000) . While this may be the case, it is very clear that performance management may also have encouraged the resurrection of old practices to enable police forces to achieve new targets.

Police integrity

It is fair to say that HMIC has not ducked this issue. In numerous recent reports, the Inspectorate has 'targeted' the integrity of police recording practices and expressed deep concern over what appears to be the widespread and continuing practice of under-recording offences, systematic misclassification and the absence of any independent audit mechanism to encourage 'ethical' recording of crime. Similarly, the Inspectorate continues to report the regular 'misuse' of prison visits by police forces to achieve acceptable clearance rates. Current pressures to meet targets can be expected to only exacerbate an evident problem.

Given its earlier wholehearted commitment to 'performance culture' it is only fair to say that HMIC has recently sought to explore some of the consequences of its application to police forces. In the 1999 *Report on Police Integrity*, it was to deplore the way commitment to 'performance culture' had encouraged unhealthy competition between officers in terms of arrest rates. In the Metropolitan Police it was to find in a further report that this 'management approach' extended to the number of stop/searches conducted by officers, which was identified as an individual or team performance indicator. Elsewhere police divisions were found to have identified their 'under-performer of the month', presumably to encourage the others by way of naming and shaming those who failed to achieve set targets.

The Inspectorate was also to find evidence in one force of police managers directing resources into 'high volume' crime to push up clearance figures even where this had meant that minimal resources were available for an investigation into a serious sexual crime. Very frequently it found that senior officers generated an atmosphere which encouraged an increase in detection rates 'at all costs'. In this environment any commitment to 'ethical recording' went out of the window.

The evidence to date suggests that the application of a 'performance culture' to policing may have unintended but serious consequences which both undermine quality of service and question its effectiveness. The use of management 'techniques' more usually associated with the sale of double glazing, endowment mortgages or mobile telephones does not appear to have a great deal to offer what remains a vital and still highly valued public service.

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