

Policing in ignorance?

Peter Gill examines police intelligence systems in light of the Bichard Inquiry Report.

In December 2003 Ian Huntley was convicted of the murders of Jessica Chapman and Holly Wells, a case that had attracted blanket media coverage since their initial disappearance in August 2002. Controversy grew rapidly as it became clear that Humberside Police had investigated Huntley in connection with eight separate sexual offences during 1995-99 and yet none of this information had emerged when he was appointed as a caretaker at Soham Village College in November 2001 and vetted by Cambridgeshire Police. The Home Secretary appointed Sir Michael Bichard to inquire into child protection measures, record keeping, vetting and information sharing in Humberside and Cambridgeshire police forces. When Sir Michael's report (Bichard, 2004) was published in June 2004 press coverage quickly focused on the dispute between David Blunkett and the Humberside Police Authority over the fate of their Chief Constable, David Westwood, whom Bichard held personally responsible for the appalling state of information management in Humberside Police. The media focus on this highly personalised battle should not surprise us, but it meant less attention was paid to the precise criticisms of police information processes.

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First, we must note the context for Bichard's inquiry. Given that policing has always depended on the acquisition, management and dissemination of information, it is remarkable that so little of the policing literature deals explicitly with these issues compared with more action-oriented issues of stop and search, arrest, order maintenance and behaviour during interrogations. As such, the concerns of researchers have 'mirrored' those of the police themselves – what matters is the chase, 'feeling collars', keeping authority on the streets; not paperwork, processing data or thinking beyond the specific problem in hand. In the last decade or so, this situation has changed somewhat – rapid advances in communications and information technology have invaded policework just as they have other forms of 'knowledge' work; accordingly, researchers have started to pay more attention.

In the early 1990s the increased perception of 'organised and serious crime', new demands from government that the police increase their effectiveness and a crisis in the credibility of crime clearance methods based on obtaining confessions

('The Guildford Four', 'Birmingham Six' *et al*) converged towards the belief that policing simply was not working. An Audit Commission Report, *Helping with Inquiries: tackling crime effectively* (1993) heralded the birth of 'intelligence-led policing' in which police were to make better use of their resources by a more proactive focus on targeting 'known criminals' and deploying informants and other surveillance technologies in order to pre-empt or disrupt criminal behaviour or organisations. This shift was reinforced by the increased availability of sophisticated software for the relational analysis of data, the promulgation of a National Intelligence Model (NIM) to establish 'best practice' for the development of appropriate structures and processes (NCIS, 2000) and the growth of local, national and transnational security networks incorporating both public and private police.

Now this all sounds very grand but the Bichard inquiry lays out in chilling detail the wide gulf between the rhetoric of intelligence-led policing and the reality. Despite the regular contacts Humberside Police had with Huntley, there was no 'organisational memory': in only one of the ten contacts with Huntley over four years was a separate intelligence form completed and this was deleted from the system one

year later (1.229-236. Numbers in brackets refer to paragraphs in Bichard, 2004). Detectives assumed, wrongly, that those working in divisional intelligence offices would extract 'intelligence' from routine crime reports. The detective inspector who was head of the Humberside Child Protection Unit at the relevant time "did not regard it as being any of his function to consider or analyse what might usefully be retained as future intelligence in any case" (2.21), regarded the Child Protection Database as unreliable and did not even know whether it could be searched by the name of an alleged abuser! (2.35) Force policy and practice for reviewing old data and determining what should be kept and what deleted was entirely confused with the result that valuable information was wrongly deleted (2.49-67). A Humberside Police press release after Huntley's conviction to the effect that the Date Protection Act had required them to delete past information on contacts with Huntley was misleading – the legislation did not require such information to be deleted; that was due to Humberside's own collective incompetence (4.3).

When, as in the Soham case, policing requires



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cooperation between forces, then further problems arise. Subject to it being actually up-to-date, the Police National Computer (PNC) provides a facility for checking on previous convictions but there is not even a 'flagging' system by which forces can check on the availability of intelligence in a different force. It is planned to have one in place by the end of 2005. Thus Cambridgeshire's vetting procedures required them to fax a force where someone had previously lived; Bichard concludes that, in the case of Huntley, it is "extremely unlikely" that the appropriate fax was ever sent to Humberside (1.359) but adds that even if it had been, Humberside would still have replied "no trace" (1.363).

Bichard acknowledges that considerable improvements were underway in Humberside before he finished his report (though they were not enough to save the chief constable's job) and he recommended the adoption of a national police intelligence system for vetting purposes. The Home Office has accepted this but it was only in 2000 that the previously planned common national intelligence system was dropped from the National Strategy for Police Information Systems (NSPIS) so we should probably not hold our breath. All police forces should have been 'NIM-compliant' by April 2004 but in 2003 a significant minority of forces fell short because of remaining problems with leadership, training and resistance (John and Maguire, 2004).

So we cannot reassure ourselves that the problems exposed by Bichard were peculiar to parts of Eastern England. Although Humberside was acknowledged as one of the worst forces in the country in respect of IT matters (2.120), other research studies indicate how far there is to travel in the effort to make policing more intelligent (Cope, 2004; Ratcliffe, 2002; Sheptycki, 2004). Strictly speaking, the Soham tragedy hardly involved issues of police intelligence at all; rather, just their ability to record, retain and share information in relation to routine inquiries. But if these basic activities cannot be managed then what hope is there for the more complex

processes of analysis and strategic thinking that are central to 'intelligence-led' policing?

The importance of these processes increases proportionately to the actual shift towards the more proactive or pre-emptive policing strategies that are advocated by policy makers – with enhanced urgency since September 11 2001. Progress in information management is being made but, even if the resources are made available, the technical issues solved, the essential privacy guarantees integrated and an appropriate oversight regime established, major obstacles remain. 'Garbage in, garbage out' is still a ruling principle of information systems, however technologically sophisticated, so both 'street' and 'management' cops must be enabled and encouraged to develop a culture that values and respects information beyond its short-term 'pay-off'. Only then is there a chance that 'intelligence-led' policing will become more than another piece of new public management rhetoric. ■

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