

Policing myths

Megan O'Neill explores the myth that bobbies on the beat cut crime.

It is 'blindingly obvious', The Daily Mail declared last year, that more 'bobbies on the beat' are needed to address this country's 'serious problem with street crime' (Utley, 2010). The latter dubiously founded claim aside, the assumption that the physical presence of a sworn police officer in uniform, wandering around urban streets, can have a significant impact on crime (in terms of prevention or detection) is not a new concept. In the 1980s, the Conservative government at the time found a ready audience when their 'tough on crime' approach was presented to the public. A key aspect of this was better pay for police and more of them. The subsequent Labour government also helped itself to power by presenting a 'tough' stance on crime, which included increasing police numbers. The recent comprehensive spending review is the first time in a very long while that the sitting government has made a reduction in police numbers a strong possibility. Since that suggestion was made, many have been

predicting a rise in crime, chaos on the streets and all manner of apocalyptic events to befall our beloved land. Now, let's all just calm down for a minute and think about this, shall we?

True, since the mid 1990s, the overall crime rate has been falling. And also true is that during the same period, police numbers have been rising in the UK. However, can we be sure that the two are connected? David Hanson, former minister for crime, policing and counterterrorism,

certainly was (Hanson, 2010). Granted, he was also trying to keep his political party in power by using a mantra that has been very successful for this purpose in the past. However, academic research doesn't support such an assumption and as every good scientist (social or natural) knows, correlation does not equal causation. Crime has been falling during this time in many countries around the world, even in those where police numbers fell. There is no empirical link between the two events.

Social norms

Academic researchers on the police have argued for many years that the police, on their own, cannot reduce the crime rate (Wright, 2002).

Crime is caused by a wide variety of variables which no single public body could ever assume to control, especially on its own. Our society's organisation, regulation and stability are based on a number of institutions, social norms, policy choices as well as global events. To assume that

putting uniformed officers 'on the streets' would override all these other factors is just not logical, Jim. We just have to look at any developing, or re-developing, nation in places like Africa or the Middle East to see that just putting police on the streets doesn't suddenly make everything better.

Achieving social stability and a low crime rate takes the commitment of a wide variety of sectors, services and actors. The police on their own cannot change a

person's upbringing, education, income, mental health and level of drug dependency (which are far more pertinent factors in one's risk of becoming involved in street crime). In fact, if our local police service decides to have a sudden 'crack down' on perceived local crime problem, resulting in a dramatic increase in arrests, this will actually lead to a short term *rise* in the recorded crime rate as these arrests are processed through the system. This is not to say that the police are unimportant in terms of crime control. They are of course a very important element in this; but one element among many.

So why do we still plead, year after year, for more police? Well, one thing that 'bobbies on the beat' can do is to make people *feel* better. Some people (although not all, by any means – just ask any low income area that already feels over policed and under protected – feel reassured knowing that there is a local police team at hand, which specialises in their geographic area, and which sends out accessible foot patrols from time to time.

It is comforting to know that since 2008, all 'neighbourhoods' in England and Wales have had their own group of Dixons of Dock Green assigned to them (Home Office, 2004). Each Neighbourhood Policing Team is comprised not only of police officers, but also Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs), special constables and members of the local authority. These teams focus on activities in their assigned geographical area and do not get involved in emergency response calls to other areas (unless it is an extreme situation). Some have argued that PCSOs are just 'plastic police', and that they can't really do anything effective because they do not have the same powers as the sworn police. While it is true that PCSOs don't have police powers, this actually makes it easier for them to be 'on the beat', providing that visible reassurance of a person in uniform. If they did have police powers, they would be in the office far more, doing the necessary paperwork (rightly) involved when an officer arrests a person and thus



Photo courtesy of Melinda Kerrison

takes his or her liberty away. PCSOs can be the 'bobbies on the beat' that our sworn officers never can be, and, as has been reported to me in my ongoing research (funded by the British Academy), are actually quite effective in this.

The Neighbourhood Policing Programme was based on the 'signal crimes' perspective. The basic theory is that there are certain criminal or anti-social events that increase a person's *fear* of crime, regardless of whether there is an actual heightened risk of victimisation. These 'signal crimes' are specific to the person or the area in question, and thus cannot be generalised to the wider population. They may not even lead to further crimes (as in the 'Broken Windows theory'). The main point is that certain perceived crimes lead certain people to feel worried about crime, and may also bring them to change their behaviour to avoid becoming victimised (Innes, 2005). The 'signal crimes' perspective was the philosophical basis for 'Reassurance Policing', which later became Neighbourhood Policing. Reassurance Policing was trialed in a few areas in England and Wales before being introduced to the rest of the country. An interesting and important element of Reassurance Policing was that it was designed to do just that – reassure members of the public – by having dedicated local policing teams addressing their specific concerns. It was *not* designed to reduce crime. If that happened indirectly as a result of new local initiatives, great!

However, the main idea was to improve confidence in the police, feelings of safety in neighbourhoods and thus create happier neighbours. It was only when the programme was rolled out to all policing areas in England and Wales that the crime reduction element was added (and the name changed).

Whether or not it has been a success in terms of crime reduction is not really an issue here. What I

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wish to point out is that foot patrols by uniformed PCSOs is a key element of Neighbourhood Policing. Do we really need a fully paid, fully trained police officer with the power of arrest to walk around, making people feel better? Is that really a good use of tax payer money and police time? PCSOs can do, and are doing, this very important job; freeing up the sworn officers to do what they are specially trained to do. My experience of Neighbourhood Policing teams is that they do work as teams, and any important information which PCSOs gather on their time in the community is passed directly on to their police officer colleagues.

We do have 'bobbies on the beat' these days, albeit a twenty-first century version of them. I would suggest that if anyone wishes to get upset and panic about the funding cuts to police services because they want 'bobbies on the beat', that they do so in relation to the potential loss of PCSOs, not police officers. Fewer police officers alone will not lead to

a sudden and chaos-inducing rise in crime. Sorry if I disappointed you. ■

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References

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