

Identify and discuss some of the key approaches and challenges associated with the police role in crime control and community safety

The role of the police in society has undergone significant change in the recent years, leading some to argue for new theories of policing in order to understand the 'transformation' (Bayley and Shearing, 1996). Such transformations include pluralisation of police duties, incorporating a range of public, private and community institutions beyond those traditionally associated with law enforcement. The activities conducted by the police have also changed, so changing the police's role in crime control and community safety. Furthermore, approaches towards policing have been impacted by new ideas within criminal justice policy more widely. For example, Crawford (1998) focuses on the increasing importance of crime prevention, whilst others have noted the relationships of crime and community cohesion, and the need to recognise patterns such as repeat victimisation (Bridgeman and Hobbs, 1997). To identify the key approaches and challenges associated with the police role in contemporary society, it is first necessary to understand the historical context within which policing debates have adapted. This analysis will consider how events, policy and academic theory have changed policing in practice, before using empirical evidence and case studies to question the value of achievements and challenges for the future.

According to Goldstein, the traditional understanding of the role of the police has been that: "policing consists of the handling of incidents" (1990:4). This loose definition reveals that the assumed purpose has simply been to manage crime; to implement the necessary measures of the criminal justice system when an individual has broken the law. In the latter half of the twentieth century, however, crime became an increasing problem in developed countries across the world. In the UK in the late 1990s, there were approximately five million reported crimes per year - a figure ten times that of 1950 (Crawford, 1998: 1). The reasons for this rapid rise were been linked to a number of factors, including growing opportunities/accessibility of consumer items allowing for a growth in thefts/burglary (Felson and Clarke, 1998) as well as growing motivations due to problems of unemployment and social dislocation (Reiner, 2007). Given the increasing crime rate, many began to argue for new strategies and approaches from the police. For example, the Scarman Report following the 1981 Brixton Riots noted the need for the police and authorities to recognise the challenges within certain communities, such as poverty and racial tensions. In 1991, the Morgan Report stressed the need for partnership within communities and recommended bringing local authorities into the role of policing. (The Morgan Report recommendations were not implemented at the time, however. Although the Conservative government welcomed the use of 'Neighbourhood Watch' schemes, it focused upon a highly punitive approach towards crime control, demonstrated by the then Home Secretary Michael Howard's 'Prison Works' speech, made at 1993 Conservative Conference).

Following the election of New Labour, the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act marked a shift in policing strategies in the UK with Tony Blair promising to be 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime'. Despite the fact that crime levels had begun to fall during the late 1990s (the British Crime Survey saw a fall of 14 per cent in reported crimes between 1999 and 2002: Audit Commission, 2002: 5), public perceptions of crime had not declined, as the same report displays: "...50 per cent of people believe that local crime rates are rising" (ibid, 2002: 4). Possibly because of this reassurance gap among the general public, the new approach to policing was to make law enforcement and crime control more visible at the local level, by involving different institutions. According to the Audit Commission briefing, 'Safety in Numbers': "The police cannot solve this problem alone. Other agencies, especially local authorities, need to get involved". (1999: 2). Such additional involvement can be seen around the country, with one example being the case of Ashford Borough Council: "[The Council] employs the manager for the multi-agency Community Safety Unit, which ensures that neighbourhood police, wardens working for Kent Council, the fire service and council teams... take a shared approach to local problems." (Audit Commission, 2008: 5). With so many more institutions now involved in policing, however, many have argued that a key challenge will be effective communication of information to ensure that those involved in the 'joined-up' approach can work together productively. The Jill Dando Institute, for example, has highlighted the need for "Fast, accurate and detailed provision of police crime and incident data at specific locations, preferably supplemented with local authority data on incivilities" (Marshall et al, 2004: 6). There have also been other problems associated with Community Safety Partnerships, for example, the HM Inspectorate of Constabulary notes that: "...the commitment of some local agencies to delivering community safety is variable, for example, probation, social services, local education and healthcare providers." (cited in Audit Commission, 2002: 16). With so many different groups involved in crime control, it is to be expected that some disagreement could occur, particularly if targets or objectives contradict one another. Goldstein (1990: 10) uses a case study of police officers involved in community safety in San Diego, during their task to combat sex work and prostitution in the area. The response of the police was to enforce restraining orders, which did reduce crimes in the community through deterrence. However, if true partnership were implemented, social services and healthcare providers may have preferred to use more preventative approaches, helping sex workers by tackling underlying drug addiction or social needs, rather than creating restraining orders which could simply displace the crime. The 2003 Criminal Justice Act attempted to introduce a range of less punitive 'community sentencing' measures, which in theory could allow the offender to compensate their local area through community service. Recent government proposals however, again appear to focus more on deterrence than rehabilitation: "Unpaid work schemes undertaken by offenders will be more punitive, with activities becoming more physical and intense." (The Conservative Party: 'Reforms to tackle reoffending, 2010). Despite this, empirical studies have shown that more therapeutic and supportive methods can often be more productive (Beach and Ford, 2003).

In addition to the problem of data sharing and collaboration between different, often opposing, institutions within the community, a major challenge for Community Safety Partnerships is the provision of adequate funding. The Comprehensive Spending Review has caused "...a reduction to police funding of 20 per cent by 2014-15, or 14 per cent once council tax precepts are taken into account." (Home Office, 2010). With police funding cut by a fifth in real terms and money being siphoned from local government to subsidise law enforcement, the rhetoric of true 'Community Safety Partnerships' may be difficult to achieve in reality. One reaction by police forces across the country, and in particular London's Metropolitan Police, has been to reduce recruitment and to appeal for volunteer Special Constables. It remains to be seen how effective such an approach will be, and whether it can compensate for substantial job losses and professional know-how.

With the growing financial pressures on the police, many have advocated techniques to make policing more efficient, such as using methods of 'Problem-Orientated Policing', first proposed by Goldstein (1990). Problem-orientated policing can be defined as "...a method for improving police effectiveness through examining and acting on the underlying conditions that give rise to community problems." (ACI, 2004). It can also be incorporated with 'new managerialism' agenda of public services, using business models to measure efficiency and effectiveness. For example, the Gloucester Crime Reduction Strategy of 2005-2008 involved four specific 'steps', which provides evidence for the prescribed managerialism of new policing techniques. First, the Gloucester strategy proposed developing partnerships within the community, with each involved grouping having a clear understanding of the governance structure of the partnership. Secondly, the strategy would conduct a full audit to provide the data upon which problem-orientated policing could be based. Thirdly, the strategy would use an array of performance management tools under five key themes: anti-social behaviour, hate crime, property crime, substance misuse and violence; each theme with its own specific aims, objectives and targets. Finally, the strategy would use monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to measure achievements and inform future recommendations. In many respects, this formalised, 'checklist' approach of problem-orientated policing (known as 'problem-solving policing in the UK) has a number of advantages. Read and Tilley (2000), for example believe that: "It is difficult to see how anyone would not be in favour of problem-solving. It is plain common sense. It really isn't rocket science." (2000: 35). Despite this, they note the problems of achieving high quality problem-solving policing in practice. Often when successes have been made, they are difficult to transfer to different regions and police forces, acting under different circumstances. As many involved in new policing theories note, there has been a move towards 'situational policing', making the specific situation of crime ever more important. Read and Tilley argue that there is "devil in the detail" (2000: 11), and so understanding the successes of problem-solving/orientated policing can sometimes be difficult assess.

Another reason for the new approach of problem-orientated policing may be the need for the public to understand more about what the police do on a day-to-day basis. According to the Home Office's Policing and Reducing Crime Unit, "The police are the 24 hour

emergency service on whom members of the community call regarding a vast range of issues, only about 30% of which are directly crime related.” (Leigh et al. 1998: 4). In October 2010, Greater Manchester Police published tweets of all their calls, of which many were not real crimes or threats to community safety. “Among them [the tweets] was a report of a man holding a baby over a bridge - but when police attended it turned out to be a man carrying a dog.” (BBC, 2010). This example shows the pressure on the police to solve increasingly complex problems of street and community crime, while at the same time dealing with trivial matters - particularly when public perceptions of crime levels are so different from real world trends, increasingly demands still further.

As this analysis has shown, the role of the police has changed significantly over time. Key approaches can be identified as the pluralisation of policing, to include local government, community groups and a wide range of other public and civilian bodies. Another approach has been the change in policing strategies, such as the influence of ‘problem-orientated policing’ inspired by empirical evidence and theory (e.g. Goldstein, 1990), as well as funding pressures and the need for greater efficiency. In terms of the challenges brought by pluralisation, greater involvement of non-police actors can make communication and collective action more difficult. There may also be problems of accountability and capacity, as those involved in schemes such as ‘Neighbourhood Watch’ may not command the same authority in law enforcement as the police. Too much dependence on the public may also be problematic, as deprived communities are often those most in need, but also those least able to help themselves, as the findings of the Scarman Report noted. As such, preventing the causes of crime through long term regeneration programmes, employment and education opportunities, is needed for sustainable ‘crime control’. Hillyard and Tombs (2007) believe that a “social harm” approach is needed in crime, policing and criminology more generally, where community underdeveloped can also be defined as ‘harm’, in addition to the harms conducted by individuals in more traditional crimes. Further challenges for the police involve making problem-orientated policing work in practice, by removing themselves from duties that may not be considered ‘problems’. With so many pressures on the police, a clearer differentiation of duties and responsibilities is needed to prevent a current situation, where “...too many local partnership agencies rely on the police to lead the community safety agenda and to set performance targets” (Audit Commission, 2002: 16). Thus, with the role of police in such flux, funding challenges may provide stimulus for more streamlined and focused approaches, continuing managerialism and targeting trends. However, despite the funding challenges, this should not be at the expense of investment in less visible benefits of community development; both long-term and short-term objectives must be met for a truly effective police role in community safety and crime control.

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