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ACQUISITIONS

Crime and Police Effectiveness

Increased allocation of resources to conventional police strategies is not enough to reduce crime; innovative techniques and improved utilization and distribution hold promise.

By Ronald V. Clarke and Mike Hough

Introduction

Although there has been a more than 10 percent increase in British police manpower over the last 5 years, it has not been accompanied by any reductions in recorded crime or improvements in clearance rates and it may seem that the increase in manpower was not high enough. However, research evidence suggests that simply devoting more police officers to conventional policing strategies will not reduce crime, but that new solutions are necessary. This research, along with the need for economy measures, has affected both governmental policy on the use of resources and the views of senior police managers.

This report summarizes the relevant research related to the police and their effects on crime levels and suggests ways in which existing resources might be used more effectively. Its main conclusions are that increasing the visible police presence is, by itself, unlikely to reduce crime and that an improvement in the rate of detection is also unlikely. However, the research provides some support for several innovative approaches to the use of existing police resources. These include the use of community and neighborhood policing, more focused patrolling, targeted surveillance of certain types of offenders, and the reduction of opportunities for crime through the use of the situational approach being developed by the Home Office Police Department.

The report draws heavily on research findings from North America, which may not necessarily be applicable to Britain. The report focuses only on the impact of the police on crime. It does not examine the many other functions of the police, and therefore offers no direct guide

to the appropriate size of the police service. Although new technologies (such as computers for generating management information) are important to many of the strategies discussed here, the report makes only passing reference to them.

Crime in Britain. Excluding traffic offenses, about 3 million crimes are recorded in Britain each year, and about 85 percent of these are reported by victims and others. The British Crime Survey shows that these recorded crimes represent only a small proportion of the total number of offenses committed. The number of recorded crimes has increased greatly over the past two decades, but this increase may result partly from easier reporting procedures. In addition, more reported crimes may be recorded—both because of improved procedures and because of increased police manpower.

A complex set of social and environmental factors is involved in the growth of crime. These factors have much more influence on crime levels than do strategies adopted by the police or by other parts of the criminal justice system.

Conventional deterrent policing

Since policing has traditionally rested on the concept of deterrence, preventive patrol has always been seen as a central police function. Foot and car patrols represent the threat of arrest by their mere presence and because they can be quickly summoned—thus contributing to public order and to reduction of fear of crime. Investigative work, another part of conventional police work, also serves as a deterrent to crime by adding to the risk detection.

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ally reduces crime, although foot patrols may increase citizen satisfaction and feelings of security. A British experiment conducted in the 1960's showed that the amount of patrolling makes little difference in the crime level, provided that some police presence exists. Several American experiments produced similar results. Since an average foot beat in a large British city covers a square half-mile, the chance that a patrol would catch an offender in the act is remote. A patrol officer in London could expect to pass within 100 yards of a burglary only once every 8 years, but might not even realize that the crime was taking place.

Interviews with habitual burglars and other offenders have shown that they know that their risks of being caught in the act are small. It is questionable whether they would be sensitive to changes in the level of risk resulting from changes in conventional foot patrol.

Car patrol. In the 1960's police managers advocated a change from foot patrols to car patrols, because they thought that car patrols would be more efficient, cheaper, and faster in response. However, little evidence suggests that car patrols are any more effective than foot patrols in reducing crime. The best-known experiment, the Kansas City Preventive Patrol Experiment, showed that a substantial increase in vehicle patrol had no impact on crime. When dealing with a large area, even intensive patrolling may not be able to provide complete, continuous coverage. In addition, most crime is not easily visible from a patrolling car. Furthermore, the potential for fast response is less of an advantage than previously believed. Although the police can respond faster, quick escapes and delays of generally 10 minutes or more in reporting crimes mean that fast responses by themselves rarely lead to arrests. Because of this, police forces are trying "graded response" methods, where urgent calls get a quick response, and other calls are scheduled with the citizen.

The move to patrol cars has been widely criticized on the grounds that the police lose touch with local news and gossip and are no longer in close contact with people's daily concerns. The reliance on vehicles and radio communications can also lead to overreactions to incidents. The costs of car patrols and their few apparent advantages suggest that increasing foot patrols would improve public confidence in the police even though it might not reduce crime. Deploying foot patrols is central to community policing and neighborhood policing, as will be discussed later.

Detective work. Another area of conventional policing--detective work--also has little impact on crime, according to the research. Most detective work focuses on relatively routine cases of burglary and theft. The investigation of most of these crimes is either straightforward or very unpromising. For most crimes that are cleared, victims or witnesses can identify the offender from the outset. A Rand Corporation study (Greenwood et al., 1977) of investigative work in 153 police departments in the United States found that "only about 3 percent of all index arrests appeared to result from special investigative efforts where organization, training, or skill could make any conceivable difference." In addition,

less than half of detectives' time is spent on investigation; much time is spent on preparing the case for prosecution. Workload surveys of four police forces show 40 to 45 percent of the time goes to investigation, 25 to 31 percent on report writing, 5 percent in court. The rest of the time is spent for other duties and meals (Tarling and Burrows, 1983).

The available research suggests that if enough personnel are available to process the easily detectable crimes and question offenders about their other crimes, increases in detective staff and technological improvements yield only marginal gains in clearance rates. Since 1973, the number of crimes cleared in England and Wales has increased by almost 50 percent, while the clearance rate has dropped from 47 percent to 37 percent. This decline may result in part from the changing proportions of detectable and undetectable crimes recorded by the police.

Innovative approaches to policing

Although conventional approaches will not produce a significant general reduction in crime, these strategies may achieve other purposes. Foot patrol may reduce fear of crime, and increases in patrol personnel may permit the police to more effectively perform functions unconnected with crime. In addition, efficiency may increase through the use of graded response systems for dispatching patrols and case screening to set priorities in detective caseloads. Because these methods alone may not result in significant improvements, some senior police managers are increasingly experimenting with alternative forms of policing.

Several types of innovations are being explored. They are distinct in concept, but often blended in practice. Efforts to refine conventional deterrent strategies to make them more focused include the use of specialized patrol strategies and the targeting of specific offender groups. Community policing and neighborhood policing try to enhance informal social controls through improving the relations between the police and the public and reducing disorder. Finally, approaches that reduce opportunities for crime are termed "situational prevention" and center on cooperative action with individuals, organizations, and other authorities in the community.

Specialized patrols and targeting. Although a variety of efforts have focused on developing more effective forms of patrolling, few have been properly evaluated in Britain. Thus, conclusions about their effectiveness must be tentative. One approach is simply to ensure that patrols are most intense at the time of day or week when most crimes occur. Another is to concentrate patrols in high-crime areas. American research has shown that such saturation patrolling seems to reduce crime in the areas covered (Dahmann, 1975; Chaiken et al., 1974; Chaiken 1978; Schnelle et al., 1977), although it is expensive and may result in displacing offenders to nearby areas or their offenses to different times.

Using stop and search tactics is another approach shown in American research to reduce crime (Boydston, 1975). However, its use in London produced large numbers

of arrests for less serious offenses. These tactics also risk upsetting the relations between the police and the public, since most of those stopped are not arrested.

Decoy patrols using plainclothes officers posing as targets have also been used, especially in the United States, for apprehending specific types of offenders, such as robbers, prostitutes, and drug abusers. These methods produce arrests and may reduce crime, but they raise sensitive issues of entrapment and ethical questions about the practice of deceit by the police.

Some police agencies target particular types of offenders by setting up specialized squads with responsibility for specific crimes such as burglary or robbery. Targeted surveillance of known offenders is a related approach. Few evaluations of these offender-based strategies have taken place in Britain, although the recent introduction of targeted surveillance in London is claimed to have been accompanied by a substantial reduction in street crimes. However, this approach is labor intensive, is effective only against very active offenders, and risks provoking a hostile reaction from the public if people are wrongly identified as active criminals.

Community policing. Community policing programs try to improve and sustain relations between the police and the public and thereby to instill a greater commitment to the law, improve the information flow to the police, and encourage community crime prevention. These programs create the positions of community constables, community development officers, and school liaison officers. Critics argue that these specialists have only a marginal impact and advocate a changed style of policing by the entire police force. Elements of this style include greater involvement of the police in the life of the community and long-term assignment of individual police officers to neighborhoods. This approach is similar to the concept of neighborhood team policing in the United States.

Disadvantages of community policing are its probable ineffectiveness for dealing with organized crime and the difficulty of using it in areas where it is most needed, such as inner city areas characterized by fragmentation and suspicions of the police. It also has the potential for concentrating efforts on the sectors of the public least likely to be considering crime or to have information about crime. Community policing assignments often have low status as well, because they conflict with the prevailing and more tough-minded police ethos.

The effectiveness of community policing will always be hard to evaluate. Some benefits will occur only over the long term; other benefits can be stated only in very general terms. However, community policing deals with a basic issue: police impact as a function, in part, of the quality of the relationships between the police and the public. Community policing can lead to a policing style that is more sensitive to the needs of local communities. Resulting increases in public confidence could lead to eventual reductions in crime.

Neighborhood policing. In contrast to community policing, neighborhood policing focuses on the task of

maintaining order on the beat. One rationale for this approach is that disorderly behavior on the part of drunks, rowdy youths, and other undesirables can trigger a spiral of neighborhood decline, leading to increased fear of crime, migration of law-abiding citizens from the area, weakening of informal social control, and, ultimately, increases in serious crime. The beat police officer on long-term assignment in areas at risk could help break this spiral.

Although there is disagreement about this approach, empirical evidence supports its underlying hypothesis. One study found that the introduction of foot patrols led to reductions in the fear of crime because of reduction in the levels of public disorder (Wilson and Kelling, 1982; Kelling, 1983). Similarly, another study found that the presence of street disorder stimulates crime levels and fear of crime and erodes informal control processes (Skogan, 1983).

Situational prevention. Situational prevention rests on the view that crime reductions can result from the direct reduction of opportunities. This approach tailors actions to specific problems. Successful examples of this approach include the screening of airline passengers and baggage to prevent airline hijacking, using photographs on credit cards, architecture that uses the concept of defensible space, surveillance by closed-circuit television, the use of neighborhood watch and property marking, and the use of caretakers and additional retail store assistants.

Much of the prevention effort is often beyond the scope of activity of the police--significant results may derive from, for example, better car design to prevent vehicle theft and vandalism. However, the police may help initiate and coordinate actions to be taken by others. This kind of work builds on existing crime prevention work, but demands more skillful analysis of local crime problems, knowledge of a wider range of preventive measures, and more highly developed negotiating skills. Police must attach more importance to crime prevention for this approach to succeed. Some British police forces have used this approach, although it has not been pursued as part of an explicit preventive philosophy. Canada and the United States have used this strategy much more widely.

This approach is limited partly by the infrequency with which crime occurs and partly by the potential, in some cases, for displacing crime to other areas or times. In addition, some people are reluctant to take the necessary action or achieve the necessary coordination, partly as a result of bureaucratic obstacles and partly because they view this approach as failing to deal with the root causes of crime. Nevertheless, many of these objections should disappear if the measures continue to prove themselves successful.

Conclusions

Despite their limitations, the innovative policing strategies described here hold some promise. The more focused strategies aimed at the arrest of specific groups of offenders should produce gains. Improving relations

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between the police and the public through community policing may result in crime reductions; similarly, reducing disorder on the beat may help reduce neighborhood decline and prevent crime. If properly pursued, situational prevention can undoubtedly lower specific types of crime. However, all of these approaches are of limited application and may not substantially lower crime.

In developing any innovations, the police must develop a greater capability for problem analysis and must recognize the potential of information technology. Improved statistics and more appropriate performance measures must supplement clearance rates. Otherwise, police managers will probably place priority on arrests rather than on crime prevention. Using local surveys of the public to determine victimization would be one way of determining the true crime rate and underscoring the need for prevention. Repeated surveys could also provide an independent measure of the success of preventive action. Also needed is greater public understanding of what the police can do and what the public should do for themselves.

The research reviewed here shows that few proven grounds exist for indiscriminately allocating further resources to traditional deterrent strategies. The precise effectiveness of the various innovations remains to be seen. Reallocating existing resources can probably meet the manpower needs of these strategies in the short or medium term. In the longer run, more staff may be needed to achieve further improvements.

The benefits of added deterrent policing such as saturation policing and stop and search must be set against their costs in terms of potential worsening of the relations between the police and the public. In addition, the effects on the rest of the criminal justice system must be considered.

Assessments of levels of police resources should not rest solely on the perceived effect on crime. The police perform many functions besides law enforcement and probably could not provide the same level of service with fewer officers. While a completely objective formula for deciding on police resources will never be devised, decisions could be better informed. The public needs better

information about police work and the effectiveness of crime control efforts. More informed discussion is also needed about the tasks that the police should and should not perform. The police must also deal with questions about the efficiency of their work that is not related to crime. Survey and other research techniques must support this effort, and the development of adequate measures of output should be given high priority.

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