

# Chapter 12

## Some Futures for the Police: Scenarios and Science

David Weir and Paresh Wankhade

Several chapters in this book, notably those by Neyroud, Rodgers, Meaklin and De Maillard but others also offer perspectives on the future of policing that raise important issues about the nature of police work and the changing societal context. It is not intended to add further complexity to these debates but to essay an overview of these issues which of course do not all point unequivocally in the same direction. In the face of an apparently emerging consensus among insiders and experts, it is worth pointing out that many contentious themes still resonate and are not resolved. Among them are the issues of legitimacy, resourcing and technology.

Some writers (Bradford et al. 2013; Tankebe and Liebling 2013; Hough 2007) point to a current or incipient crisis of legitimacy around questions like whether the public get the police they want or need, and whether these tensions between differing perspectives of what is legitimate as between various publics, the political establishment and the police professionals can be easily resolved. Several writers state as a matter of agreed consensus among experts that the days of street policing are over and public visibility cannot in future be guaranteed, that instant response is always subject to resource limitations and implicit prioritisation of cases (Oliver 2001). This answer makes sense to the expert analyst but there are nonetheless widespread indications that this answer continues to be unacceptable to the public at large (Skogan 2009). It is commonly stated especially at government level that the major threats to security in the UK come from terrorist action, yet in a recent online survey (Greater London Authority 2013, p. 1) about policing priorities faced with a choice between dealing with terrorism or providing safe streets and domestic protection, the responses were 70% for the latter as a priority.

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Likewise, the emerging establishment view supported by many senior figures in the police service is that “crime is down, crime rates are down and the public should feel reassured”. However, it is clear that much of what the public experience as “crime” is not reflected in these statistics (Travis 2014) and that because of “gaming” (which has of course always existed: they were cuffing in Leeds in the 1960s) or explicit suppression many events that are experienced by their victims as highly undesirable are not recorded as crime at all (Patrick 2011; Bevan and Hood 2006).

Neyroud argues that adding back the known quantum of internet and fraud crimes to the acknowledged overt figures would increase these by 50%: these are big numbers and he concludes that the police are failing to cope because of the limitations of geography and political jurisdiction and that this issue challenges legitimacy as well as visible performance (Dry 2014). The grey figure has always been known about, victimless crime has been debated and contended and the widespread existence of white-collar crime has been understood at least since the 1920s, but it is now an undisputed fact that the financial impact of white-collar crime if thoroughly summarised and categorised has vastly overtaken traditional crimes against the person for financial gain. But for one type of crime you lose your liberty for a stretch of years, for another you lose your knighthood and your organisation has to pay something back.

The challenge to the perceived legitimacy of an institution is not always met with at the front door of rational debate but often sneaks in unsuspected through the back door of disillusion or the partly opaque side windows of perception and myth (Maybin 2014). Hard cases make bad law, certainly, but they may stir up strong sentiments. The death of babies due to contaminated feed supplied by a commercial supplier in a specialist unit for the treatment of especially vulnerable cases may make a tiny contribution to an institutional or regional infant mortality rate but its capacity to create an urban myth about societal priorities in a late capitalist urban society may be very powerful. Cases have more impact than rates and if someone in your street has had their private space violated or their body attacked or if one of your hard-working elderly relatives has lost a pension entitlement while fund managers are retiring on six figure salaries to gated communities, the legitimacy issues resonate, perhaps erratically and are capable of amplification in the context of a new politics. In the debate about “fat cats” as well as the de-construction of “Plebgate” alike, for example the Police Federation may no longer continue to be unambiguously respected as the honest broker of professional craft in policing and workers’ rights in the face of resource constraints.

As Bishop states in her piece, “The confidence and trust of the public is an absolute priority in policing.” The listening skills that Bishop sees as central to the identification of risk depend on the capacity of police and public to meet in the middle for this conversation and the choice of location is driven by the way people live their lives rather than by where the light from the lamppost falls because this is not where the coin was dropped. In encounters with the public procedural justice and efficient outcomes need to be in balance, because research findings show, unsurprisingly but nonetheless significantly that good experiences lead to good perceptions and per contra negative experiences to distrust, cynicism and hostility.

Legitimacy concerns also underlay other issues such as diversity. The Police Foundation and other bodies re-iterate that policing in areas of minority or immigrant populations is inhibited through lack of tacit knowledge about cultural or socio-economic experience but also contributes to lack of perceived legitimacy but some of the suggested solutions like increased recruitment from the international labour market or late onset direct entry of applicants with specialist skills could also exacerbate the legitimacy agenda.

The legitimacy issue does not go away because the experts are satisfied that they can explain how these variances come about. In a period in which the legitimacy of the integrity of the political system called “The United Kingdom” is subject to existential challenge it is highly likely that the legitimacy of other hallowed institutions will continue to be on the public’s agenda.

Resourcing issues likewise do not admit of facile solutions. Many writers point out that the glory days of ring fenced budgets for policing are over and will not return. Resourcing lies at the heart of many debates about performance and here again the answers are not simply summarized in increased budgets and clearer outcomes against generic and ultimately unstable pledges about “public confidence”. New Public Management and the Performance Culture that produces the Monday Morning review by the “Shudda Brigade” (Marsh et al. 2007) may have faded into the recent history but it is more than the scars that remain.

De Maillard argues that in the French police service, there have been similar impacts on the preference for quantifiable outcomes, increased centralization, increased cynicism, and of course in manipulation of figures and gaming. His recommendation that wider frames of reference than just measurable outcomes, qualitative and softer measures and client and public feedback takes us back into the themes of legitimacy and professionalism. As Rogers points out policing is a “people and information” occupation and to many police people is a true vocation.

The promise of technology enables new systems enabling the police to move from reactive to proactive stances, intelligence-led and systems-driven with the explicit promise that specialist knowledge-bases surmounting geographical limitations and delivered by professionals supported to enhance their capabilities imply that the Skills Agenda needs to be constantly attended to. High profile cases like the Madeleine McCann disappearance and the Ashya King “baby snatching” saga indicate that in terms of some inter-institutional and inter-cultural situations policing in the UK can be portrayed as insular and insensitive.

Language skills, international experience, emotional intelligence and no-blame cultures may be becoming the foundation of experienced operational strategic judgement in the high end glocal labour market and these trends need to be sensed in the police if the service is to move beyond the law and order rhetoric and the founding fundamentals of law, procedure and time served drinking in the tacit knowledge of the canteen culture. Constable and Smith remind us that police cultures are plural and that accommodations to policy changes are likely therefore to be diverse and to some extent unpredictable.

Some historical perspective offers a context. Policing of the kind that we know in the kind of society we thought we were becomes part of the fabric of our society

around the same epoch as the printed newspaper in the early-mid Nineteenth century and has arguably been until now rather less disturbed by technology than has the news industry, in which the core delivery model has been dramatically altered by radio, TV, and now by social media. But technology now enables both greater access, integration of delivery systems and personalisation that implicates both news and policing. In most societies there has been an ongoing tussle between individual freedom of access and contestation and the centripetal tendencies of authority, centralisation and hierarchy.

Neyroud further argues that it is police professionals and the police as an evidence-led science who should own the next phase of its future, and many both inside and outside the police service will echo this meme. It is undoubtedly fair to see science as relatively undervalued in this context and as providing the basis for more effective and efficient solutions to operational policing encounters. But it is not clear either that the public en-masse, or as individuals or as represented by the available systems of public control and representation will be ready to cede their extant democratic rights to exert control over their police in this way. The legitimacy issue will not go away.

What many of the contributors to this book have shown is that there exists immense positivity towards the need for a timely re-examination of the fundamentals of policing and the role of the communities and publics they serve. This re-engagement should also encompass the reality of continually-evolving smart technologies that raise the standards of competent performance on both sides of the bargain between publics and police.

What is absolutely certain is that the first movers in “new crimes” like people-trafficking, identity-theft, and communications-interception to name but a few lies with the criminals: both police and public are continually playing catch up. Therefore we may be often too late to catch on because we don’t understand the rules of these new games that the criminals are continually making, and perhaps think it beneath our dignity because we “have specialists who know that stuff”. A recent McKinsey Report (Divol et al. 2012) on the continuing evolution of information systems in strategic decision concludes that “As artificial intelligence grows in power, the odds of sinking under the weight of even quite valuable insights grow as well. The answer isn’t likely to be bureaucratizing information, but rather democratizing it: encouraging and expecting the organization to manage itself without bringing decisions upward.” To a great extent discretion in handling roles has always been present in police work, especially perhaps at the level of sergeant where management and street framings of wicked situations admitting no clear protocols are often met and have to be negotiated and implemented using sound judgement based on experience continually updated and necessarily unskilled.

This is already happening in other sectors. In academic life it is now well understood that new technology not only enables existing delivery modes, but fundamentally changes the balance of knowledge-power in the classroom and that the “professor knows best and don’t interrupt while he reads his book chapters as a lecture course” model of knowledge transfer leads only to boredom, loss of motivation and untaught students.

Talk of new partnership models of engagement (Maguire and John 2006) must involve downloading tasks into competent and parallel institutional contexts in social services, healthcare, insurance and community organisations for example but also in enabling, enhancing and trusting an increasingly savvy client community to know what they can do for themselves and in moving away from the control and hierarchy-encrusted procedures of the last century and a half. If that creates a new momentum for re-examining the opportunities for prevention of harm, of proactive information-led intervention and for not doing some things that either can't be done with the resource base, don't need to be done because they don't matter or evade the reality of control while delivering big on the rhetoric and the public stance... that may be no bad outcome. The ultimate objective is the good society in which citizens feel safe and criminals feel anxious no matter whose crime figures look good or no matter who takes credit for it. The responsibility for that ultimately lies with both police and the public they serve.

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