


Number crunching

New research suggests that an emphasis on performance measures for crime and detection rates can lead to forces diverting resources from dealing with anti-social behaviour. Phil Chamberlain reports as the Government launches its Respect Action Plan.



by Phil Chamberlain

 Dr Paul Collier, who carried out the research, *Managing Police Performance: accountability, performance, measurement and control*, backs calls for more police officers on the beat as a means to reassure the public and impact on anti-social behaviour - even if they do not necessarily help directly with detection rates.

Dr Collier, from the Aston Business School in Birmingham, led the study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council through the Advanced Institute of Management Research programme.

He looked at the management processes in a large metropolitan force, a small force and two medium-sized forces to try to get a picture which reflected forces across the country.

The research was published in October last year but has not reached a wider public audience until now.

The in-depth study of the forces involved a series of interviews with chief officers and other senior officers at both headquarters and Basic Command Unit level as well as police officers on the ground.

Dr Collier suggests that the tasking process in each force - where funds are allocated according to crime patterns, geographic hot spots and prolific offenders - has been the

major cause of performance successes.

He also believes that it is strongly supported by senior officers as "it matches their professional view of what policing is about".

However, in three of the four forces studied, anti-social behaviour did not feature in the tasking process. Dr Collier believes money diverted from funding a visible police presence, the beloved bobby on the beat, may not produce quantifiable crime reduction - but it does reduce the public's fear of crime.

'The traditional response by police officers to calls from the public has been reduced in order to invest in proactive units to fight crime and engage in problem-solving activity, some of which is in relation to anti-social behaviour,' he said.

'These are likely to have important and longer lasting effects, but the reduced visibility of police appears to have hit public confidence, despite the success experienced in reducing crime.'

The research focussed on performance management but also looked at the role of the National Intelligence Model (NIM) and the relationship between the two.

Dr Collier said the results could help explain why crime

levels are generally falling but the fear among the public is not.

'In only one of the four forces studied was anti-social behaviour evident as a factor in local decision making about use of resources,' said Dr Collier.

'Processes are unduly dominated by 'top-down' performance measures because anti-social behaviour is difficult to measure and improvement targets have not been specified.'

According to Dr Collier, the research shows that police forces and the Government need to balance how performance is assessed by looking at antisocial behaviour when decisions are made on where to focus attention.

He said that chief officers were concerned about the 'threat by the Home Office's Police Standards Unit (PSU) intervening' which meant their attention was focussed on national performance targets. Whereas NIM (National Intelligence Model) looks at local priorities.

He added that most high volume crime, such as burglary and violent offences, fit into priorities at both a national and local level, but that anti-social behaviour has not tended to be seen as equally important.

Dr Collier adds that chief police officers do now have

greater confidence in their ability to have an impact on crime.

He says that it was only five years ago that many thought the underlying socio-economic causes of crime were too difficult to overcome and there was little partnership working with other agencies.

Forces are now held more accountable for their performance. Performance monitoring of forces is now the accepted norm and has largely been linked to crime levels as they are an obvious standard by which to judge success or failure.

But Dr Collier adds: 'However there was a very real focus on improving performance in each force investigated and this was generally assumed to have been effective.'

- Dr Collier is senior lecturer in Management Accounting at Aston Business School. His study, *Managing police performance: accountabilities, performance measurement and control*, involved interviews, observations of meetings and shifts and a review of documents at force and basic command unit level. For more information click on: <http://www.aimresearch.org/publications/psreportfull.pdf>