




The numbers game

While politicians claim that the police service has never had it so good, with the highest numbers of police officers on the ground in years, Norman Dennis, director of community studies at think-tank Civitas, looks behind the statistics and argues that officers are being taken away from their basic duties, tied to paperwork and dealing with more crime.

 In 1971, when the population was 49 million, there were 1.6 million recorded crimes. The population is 52 million now and there are 5.9 million recorded crimes.

Although the number of police officers has increased, currently at around 140,000, the number of crimes they are dealing with has rocketed and this means many of the fundamental functions of police officers, such as being visible and patrolling as a means of preventing crime, have fallen by the wayside.

Yet vast areas of controversy lie behind those figures and how the police are best placed to deal with such a hike in crime.

To this day there are academics, civil servants, journalists, politicians and others, no doubt police

officers among them, who deny that the figures are of any significance. There is no need to argue about the causes of the increase, they say, because no increase has taken place. The increase in the number of recorded crimes is not at all the result of there being more crimes committed. It is purely a matter of new definitions of crime, or new ways in which crimes are recorded, or a heightened likelihood that an offence will be reported to the police rather than overlooked, or a heightened likelihood that a crime reported by the public will be recorded by the police, or a combination of all these things. Perhaps police officers are more sceptical than most about the figures. They see first hand how the figures are handled before they are passed to

the Home Office to become the raw material for the national crime statistics.

But after thirty or forty years during which scorn was poured on the figures as the production of people in a 'moral panic', most people at last regard the figures, for all their flaws, as providing a usable account of the growth or decline of crime nationwide, year by year and decade by decade, controversy rages about the explanation of the trends that the official statistics record. This has been especially so since the figures recorded by the police were supplemented by figures provided by victims themselves to the British Crime Survey. To the embarrassment of the dominant 'moral panic' school of criminology at the time, the survey showed the same

pattern of growth in crime as that reported in criminal statistics. But there is little agreement on what the causes of the growth of crime are.

Cause for concern

Some people say that it is merely a matter of there being more things to pinch. Others say that it is simply one way in which a general hedonistic and self-centred way of life expresses itself in certain segments of population, and that the prosperity of the last forty or fifty years has made its emergence inevitable and irreversible. Others point to the decline in religion; the breakdown of the family; the failure of the schools to inculcate self-discipline and respect for the rights of others or recreational drug use.

Officer numbers

For the purposes of this article I shall deal here only with police-officer strength.

From the point of view of the accuracy of the figures as a measure of actual crimes committed one year taken with the next, whether or not the crime figures reflect a rise in crime, they involve an increase in the workload of police forces.

Police figures are first given for the year 1860. In that year, when the population of England and Wales was 20.1 million, there were 101,369 crimes recorded by the police, and there were 20,760 police officers. In spite of the rise in population, and an increase in the standard of living, providing criminals with much more to steal, by 1913 the official crime figure had steadily declined, not just in proportion to the population, but actually in absolute numbers, to 97,933 crimes. There were 54,552 police officers to deal with that number of officially recognised incidents. In 1918 there were still fewer crimes, 87,782, and more police, 55,860. Even in 1931 there were still only 159,278 such officially recognised incidents to be dealt with by the 58,656 police officers.

What a contrast with 2005. The police forces of England and Wales have 5.9 million official incidents a year, including more than 100,000 robberies to deal with. Although there are more than 140,000 police officers, according to the latest figures for March 2004, more than double the numbers of police officers compared to 1931, crucially, they have 37 times more official 'crimes' than in 1931 to deal with.

Taking control

If we accept that the figures do indeed show that crime has increased, then from the point of view of the reasons for the increase in crime, whatever the reasons might be, there is a police task of control. The original principles of British policing in modern times were laid down by the first joint commissioners of the Metropolitan Police, Charles Rowan and Richard Mayne.

Their first principle was that

the police had a 'basic mission', and that was the control of crime and disorder. Other institutions and informal arrangements—families, schools, philanthropic associations, local authorities in society have basic functions different from that, though in the Rowan-Mayne police philosophy, they all share a responsibility for preventing crime and disorder. They express this view in their police principle that "police, at all times, should maintain a relationship with the public that gives reality to the historic tradition [of England] that the police are the public and the public are the police; the police being only members of the public who are paid to give full-time attention to duties which are incumbent on every citizen in the interests of community welfare and existence".

The first of the Rowan-Mayne principles established that there is one basic police mission. What that mission is, is re-emphasised in the last of their principles. "The test of police efficiency is the absence of crime and disorder, not the visible evidence of police

action in dealing with it". Police officers were a little bit like the people who sit on chairs in art galleries, guarding the treasures by their mere presence. They are doing their job when they have nothing to do but be there. The police's job was unequivocally to prevent crime occurring at all, by such a high degree of supervision in their local communities that any would-be miscreant would live with the knowledge that his offence would be traced to him, and he would be punished for having committed it and he would therefore think better of committing an offence.

Beyond a certain level, the failure to carry out the function of preventing the growth in crimes-to-be-dealt-with sets up a vicious circle. The police have to switch from prevention being their primary role to detecting suspects and 'clearing up' crimes. Members of the public who, under a regime of little perceived crime, would themselves have intervened to restore public order or check misbehaviour become less willing to do so.

Bound by paperwork

The preventive presence of a constable becomes rarer as the processing of crimes-to-be-dealt-with withdraws them into the station to deal with the paper work. Brian Paddick, commander in the Lambeth borough of the Met Police, used his discretion to replace cautions or arrests in Brixton by on-the-spot confiscations and warnings for a trial six-month period for adult possession of small quantities of cannabis in the second half of 2001. One of the reasons he gave was that a cannabis arrest could take two officers up to five hours to process it through the system.

With police officers preoccupied with unavoidable work at the station, the chances of detecting the perpetrators of on-going crimes are reduced, so that the criminal is further emboldened and the formerly public-minded citizen is further disheartened. Where before the beginnings of criminal behaviour - public drunkenness, vandalism, drug taking and so forth, would have been nipped in the bud by confident

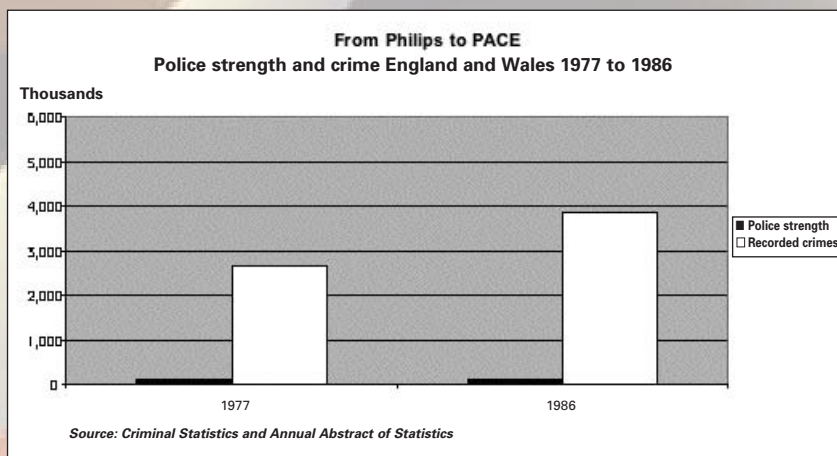


Figure 1

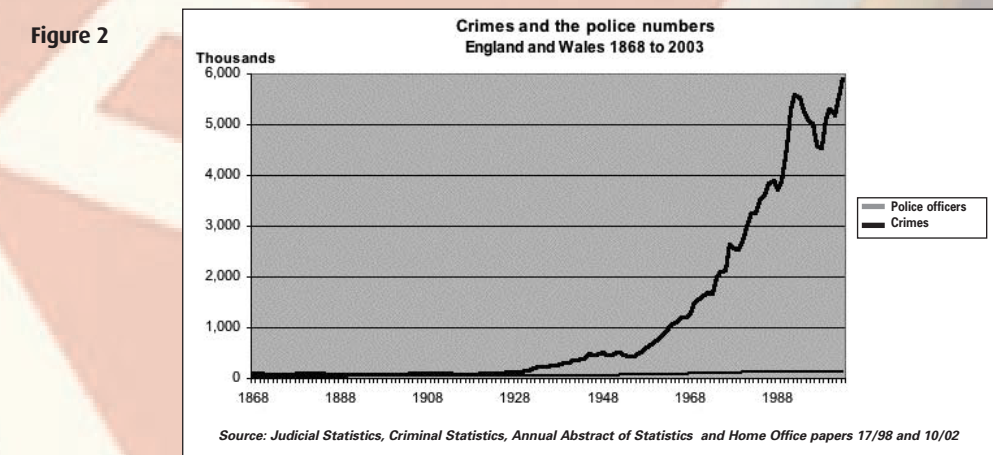


Figure 2

law-abiding citizens who had confidence that they would be backed up by public opinion, the police and the courts, still more crimes are left to be dealt with by the police.

Playing with numbers

The failure to match police numbers to the problems with which the police and public were confronted is shown in the diagram that deals with the period from the mid-1970s and mid-1980s (fig 1), when the number of crimes-to-be-dealt-with was rising fast, but when the consensus was at its strongest in academia and the intellectual establishment generally believed that crime was not 'really' rising, that the figures measured only the rising degree of 'moral panic'.

So long as there are only four or five crimes-to-be-dealt-with a year by each police officer, the state of affairs that prevailed for decades before the 1960s, police officers could be on duty for twenty-four hours a day, and could patrol singly. When the growth in

the number of crimes-to-be-dealt-with surged from the mid-1950s onwards, reaching a very high peak in the mid-1990s, working hours had to be cut to an eight-hour day, cutting manpower to a third at a stroke. When perceived dangers on the streets increased, patrolling in pairs becomes normal practice, cutting manpower, in effect, once again in half.

In these circumstances, there are fewer officers available for preventive patrolling, public spirit becomes too dangerous to be practiced, detection rates fall, crimes-to-be-dealt-with increase, the criminal element feels for more confident they can 'get away with it'.

The chart (fig 2) shows that the increase in police numbers hardly registers when the scale has to accommodate the increase in crime. It vividly exposes the often repeated and true, but judged against the scale of the problem scarcely relevant, assertion that police numbers are at a record high. It exposes more vividly still the assertion that crime

numbers are at an historic low, or back to the 1980 figure.

The graph shows a fall in crimes-to-be-dealt-with since the early 1990s. The rise in the past two or three years is uncontroversially the result of changes in recording rules - incidents are now included in the figures that would not have been included under the previous recording rules. But the fall back to the historically very high crime levels of the early 1980s has been due to measures which have involved members of the general public restricting their own liberty by not venturing into newly dangerous places at dangerous times and engaging in expense of money and effort in securing their own homes, business premises and portable property against burglary, robbery and theft. Manufacturers have made theft from or of motor vehicles much more difficult than they were ten or twenty years ago. Where civic peace and security depended to a larger extent on the preventive presence of a police officer, namely, on the street,

crime continued to sore until earlier in this century.

The progress of robberies in the London borough of Lambeth was the most striking illustration of surging increase for many years after other crimes figures had begun to fall. The monthly figures of robberies in Lambeth in 2001 were far in excess of the annual figure for robberies in the whole of England and Wales during most of the nineteenth century and until well into the twentieth century. It was commander Paddick's misfortune - similar surges in street crime were occurring in other areas of London and elsewhere in England and Wales - to be in command of the Lambeth force during precisely the period of most rapid growth, when he chose to present himself as the advocate of what he called 'a more progressive approach' to crime in a doomed attempt to adjust police action to existing police numbers, instead of adjusting police numbers to the requirements of law and order.

A comparison of the national chart and the Lambeth chart (fig 3 and 4) shows that the new 'reduced' level of robbery by February 2005 remained enormously high by historic standards.

A written answer on 22 January 2001 to a question in Parliament showed that in the Nottinghamshire force each officer had 63 crimes-to-be-dealt-with in the year ending September 2000. In Humberside the figure was 60, in Greater Manchester, 55. With these numbers, carrying out the function of prevention on the Rowan-Mayne model is, quite simply, an impossibility.

● *Norman Dennis and George Erdos compare policing methods in Britain, France, Germany and the USA in their book Cultures and Crimes: Policing in Four Nations.*

Figure 3

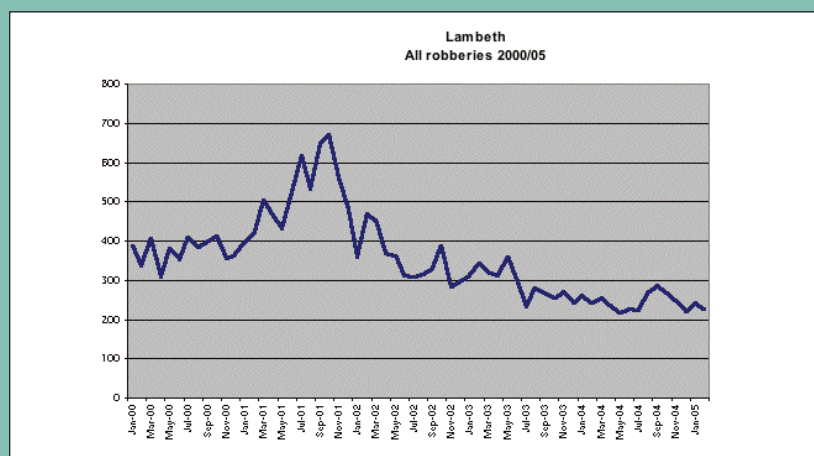
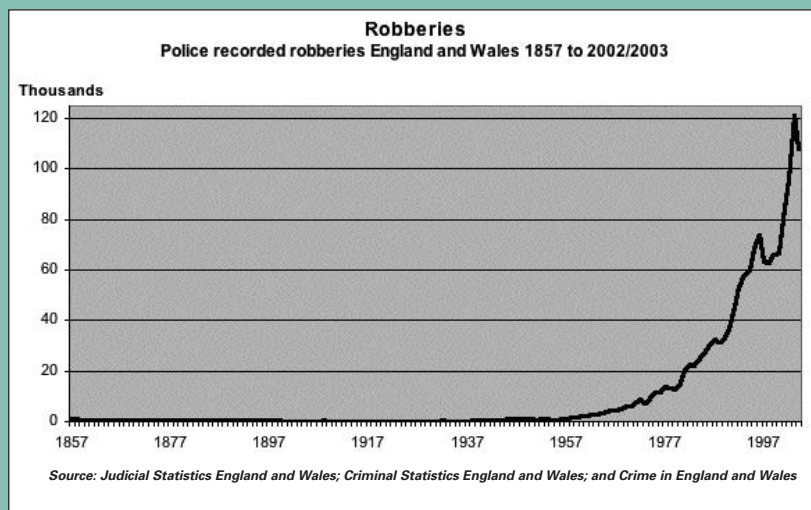


Figure 4

Norman Dennis will be a speaker at the Federation's Constables' Central Committee Conference on May 17.