



Going, going, gone

Police officers arresting children for throwing cakes, chasing targets but not being able to respond to urgent 999 calls, shift strength barely half what it should be in some force areas. These are some of the stark findings presented in a Police Federation report into 24/7 response policing. Syreeta Lund reports

The Police Federation has uncovered disturbing evidence that 24/7 response teams are dangerously under-staffed and overloaded. The government push for neighbourhood policing teams to be in place by 2008 is adding to the burden of police officers forgotten and undervalued at the sharp end of the job, according to the research, published this month.

The final report, *24/7 Response Policing in the Modern Organisation Report – Views from the Frontline* by Dr Mike Chatterton and Federation researcher Emma Bingham reveals that police officers at the public face of the service – responding to a whole array of incidents – are often having to manage with a half to two-thirds of recommended shift strength when dealing with urgent calls from the public.

Police magazine reported in January last year on the interim research into the state of 24/7 response teams and this final report backs up the findings in more detail with anecdotal evidence from officers on the ground battling with staffing problems, low morale, chasing government targets for sanction detections and not being able to use their own discretion, extra paperwork, pressure from call centres to run from job to job and probationers thrown in at the deep end.

The second phase of research took place between February and June 2006 and broadened out to include eight forces involved in neighbourhood policing projects - Greater Manchester, Lancashire, the Metropolitan (Wandsworth), Northumbria, Surrey, West Mercia, West Midlands and Wiltshire.

The research included face-to-face interviews with accounts from constables, sergeants and inspectors involved in 24/7 response policing.

Staffing levels

When officers from 17 groups interviewed in the forces were asked about normal staffing levels on their shifts, seven reported that they normally parade on half shift strength and 12 revealed that they worked on two-thirds of normal shift strength.

Alan Gordon, vice-chairman of the Police Federation, and chairman of the Futures Group who commissioned the report, said: "What we found is a service at crisis point. The level of abstractions from 24/7 response teams is unacceptable. This situation is exacerbated by the formation of the neighbourhood policing teams which are labour intensive. The concept of neighbourhood policing is great, but it has not been fully realised because of a lack of resources and no proper evaluation."

Research by the PA Consulting Group, carried out for the government, entitled *Diary of a Police Officer*, published in November 2001, found that abstractions, or taking officers away from normal duties for other work, and sickness and training meant reliefs were down to a 'bare minimum'. This situation appears to have worsened, according to the Federation's report.

Paul Tonks, chairman of West Midlands Police Federation, said: "Forces have gone headlong into neighbourhood policing at the expense of frontline officers responding to immediate calls from the public in a quest to reach government targets."

Calling 999

The report highlighted that call centres, who are also under pressure to hit government targets and 'clear their screens' for attendance to different

gradings of crimes, were controlling response officers' workloads.

"There are stark contrasts. Everything is immediate response to ensure they reach performance targets and clear their screens. At the other end of the spectrum calls that merit an immediate response are downgraded.

"An example would be where youths are breaking into someone's car, they report it and it merits an immediate response but the call taker may wait 20 minutes and call them back by which time it does not require an immediate response because the youths have left. It gets downgraded and then when an officer is sent round they face the wrath of the public because they failed to turn up immediately", explains, Mr Gordon.

"If a member of the public rings the police they are usually at their wit's end so it should be unacceptable that when that happens you are put into a queue and an officer is sent out three days later"

Paul Kelly, chairman of Greater Manchester Police Federation, said that response teams and neighbourhood policing teams split the numbers of officers and have had a knock-on for the resilience of the force.

He backed up the research saying call centres are under pressure from targets and the public are losing out because of it.

He told *Police*: "The big issue for us is that neighbourhood policing is a luxury we can't afford. If a member of the public rings the police they are usually at their wit's end so it should be unacceptable that when that happens you are put into a queue and an officer is sent out three days later. This is what neighbourhood policing is delivering - if people see someone breaking into their car they want the police to respond immediately. You do not call 999 everyday; it's acceptable to wait in a queue to get through to a bank but not to the police."

Officers also said they were being sent to jobs that did not require an emergency response just so the call centres screens were cleared, one officer told the report:



“I’ve been sent out of the station to look at the sky because they had a person report a pink cloud hovering menacingly over his house. The call centre should have told them it was not a police matter.”

Sanction detections

The Home Office reviews the performance of police forces on the basis of their sanction detection rate. The sanction detection rate is the percentage of crimes for which someone is charged, summonsed, receives a caution or other formal sanction.

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Forces are set targets for sanction detections as part of the government’s Police Performance Assessments. According to the Home Office short guide, 2005 to 2006, as to why they measure performance, they state:

‘Improving performance management helps improve performance by highlighting strengths and weaknesses.’

However, because forces are now judged primarily on how many sanction detections they have, priorities are being skewed and officers are finding they are under pressure to criminalise members of the public who would previously have been let off with a verbal caution for something considered to be a minor offence.

Mr Gordon describes the picture unravelling in many forces: “If you have burglary and you spend a few days investigating it, it is still only one sanction detection yet you could go out and issue a section 5 of the Public Order Act for someone urinating in the street after a night out drinking and do that three or four times in a night and have three or four sanction detections.”

One officer interviewed in the research said: “We were called to an incident on a bus, people throwing cream

cakes. We had to crime it up and investigate it. A complete and utter waste of time. It took an hour on the phone to record the crime with the Bureau...it can take an hour for them to answer the phone sometimes. If you have more than one crime, they’ll only take one crime off you, so you spend two hours on the phone sorting out two crimes.”

Bureaucracy is also weighing down heavily on response officers, those who took part in the focus groups all said that since the Crown Prosecution Service has taken over responsibility for making most of the key decisions in cases, their workload has increased dramatically in relation to prisoner processing and case building.

Officers also cited their aversion to having to record the same items of information on several forms for the convenience of other departments in the forces, the report remarks how they believe this relates to the ‘dogsbody’ status of 24/7 response officers.

Overall, the report concluded, that the police reform programme and the pace at which it is being implemented is ‘at the root of the problem of 24/7 response policing. The picture we were presented with was one of frontline officers struggling to cope with the realities of rapid reform and constant change.

Mr Gordon said: “The message I am trying to get across to the government is that we are trying to run before we can walk. We haven’t properly evaluated neighbourhood policing, we have no idea of resources or what it will do to demand levels. Before we have the full picture we have to introduce it by 2008. We are saying it is far too quickly; we need to evaluate look at the impact it is having on police officers and the service they are trying to provide to the public.”

What do you think?

If you have any comments about issues raised, write to slund@jcc.polfed.org

