Coping with Public Demand: A Challenge for Police Management

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This paper, delivered at the 1980 meeting of the American Society of Criminology, describes the preliminary results of a study the full report of which is in preparation. The authors wish to acknowledge the assistance of their colleagues in the Home Office Research Unit, London, in preparing this paper.

Until comparatively recently knowledge of demand for police service has been limited to general characteristics. Research has shown, for example, that almost all calls for assistance reach the police by way of the telephone—remarkably few members of the public choosing to call at police stations (Reiss, 1971). The considerable diversity of demand has also been well documented and researchers, adopting a managerial perspective, have attempted to characterise demand by classifying incoming calls under a variety of heads: law enforcement, crime control, and social welfare. The value of this work should not be underestimated. Unfortunately, it has been used to greater effect in understanding relatively narrow operational issues—such as police work loads and manpower deployment—than revealing the needs of the community and the form of police response to such needs. The research discussed in this paper goes some way to redressing the imbalance by examining the way a typical British police force responds to the requests made of it for assistance.

The design for the study drew on the concepts of supply and demand. Demand for service was examined through a content analysis of tape-recorded telephone conversations in which members of the public call the police for assistance; this information was supplemented by interviews with callers shortly after phoning. In all some 300 callers were interviewed by research staff and 500 telephone transcripts were analysed. To examine supply the study considered the response of the police radio controller—the officer to whom the public speak on telephoning—and the subsequent behaviour of uniformed patrol and detective officers. The performance of police officers was assessed in terms of tangible outcomes (for example arrests, recovery of lost property, "moving on" troublesome youths), and with regard to public satisfaction with the service received. Following preparatory work in eight police forces, the main study was undertaken in a force situated in the north of England. In terms of size and organisation the force selected was typical of provincial forces throughout the country.[1] Fieldwork for the study was based primarily on a subdivisional police office serving a mainly working-class suburban area of some 134,000 people.

Discussion of public demand and police supply comprise the first two sections of the paper. The final section questions the effectiveness of police performance, and considers existing proposals for the development of a better and/or more rational system of responding to community needs. The conclusion is reached that, in this area at least, plans for the implementation of new management strategies have outstripped understanding of the underlying problems.

Demand for Service

With some notable exceptions (cf. Pate *et al.*, 1976; Maguire, 1980) research into public demand for police services has failed to explore such issues as the expectations of the public on calling the police, their reasons for doing so and the procedures they follow. The study now reported examined some of these questions and the preliminary findings are discussed below. The important interrelationship between supply and demand has yet to be fully explored.

Nevertheless, a clearer and more precise understanding of the policing needs of the community is beginning to emerge.

Demand for police service can be said to have a number of characteristics, that is to say:

Public Uncertainty. 20% of those members of the public interviewed reported having found some difficulty in deciding whether or not to seek police assistance. Uncertainty arose for a variety of reasons: callers were unsure whether the incident observed constituted a breach of the law, whether or not it was too trivial to report to the police, or whether they had correctly interpreted the incident observed. Others feared reprisals on the part of those involved in the incident.

Reporting Procedure. Deliberation on the part of the public led to some delay in calling for assistance. Thus, while 40% of the public reported calling the police within five minutes or less of discovery or cessation of involvement in an incident, 37% of callers took 25 minutes or more to bring an incident to police attention. In seeking police attention callers frequently failed to differentiate between the emergency telephone system available to them (free of charge) and the standard system. 28% of calls received via the emergency system falling into the study sample were found to be trivial—involving, for example, the theft of milk from doorsteps and chimneys from rooftops—and 26% required only routine response in terms of time; whilst 12% of non-emergency system calls did not concern trivial matters and 15% required a swift response from the police. There was, therefore, a considerable overlap in nature (in terms of seriousness and urgency) between the type of incident reported on the emergency and non-emergency telephone system.

Reasons for Demand. The public interviewed were found to report crime for a variety of reasons: in anticipation that the police would catch the offender; to alert the police that some disturbance had occurred in their area, or in the hope of subsequently pursuing a successful insurance claim. Others explained their action in terms of transferring responsibility for the observed incident, of gaining help and reassurance or of "fighting back" against some unpleasant incident recently experienced. Some described their actions in calling the police as "automatic", no thought being given to the reasons prompting their response.[2]

Public Expectations. Public expectations of the police service were precise. It was assumed, for example, that action would follow in response to their call, and that this action should result in a uniformed officer visiting them within a relatively short space of time—43% of respondents anticipated the patrol would arrive within 10 minutes. Looking further ahead, the public anticipated that on attending the incident the police would behave in a "proper way", that is, they would correctly enact the role ascribed to them by dealing with situations calmly and with authority and would follow a set of procedures which might include interviewing, taking statements, securing premises and restoring order.

In sum, diversity in the range of incidents brought to police attention was found to be matched by much variety among the reasons prompting the public to seek assistance. The reporting process itself was found to be marked by uncertainty and some delay; furthermore the content analysis of telephone conversations indicated that demand for service reached the police in the form of uninformative and frequently highly ambiguous requests for assistance. To be set against this, those members of the public interviewed had clear and consistent expectations of the actions the police should take once summoned. The public, moreover, admitted with the benefit of hindsight that traditional aspects of police performance (taking statements, fast response, searching for forensic evidence, etc) probably achieved little in terms of controlling crime in general or solving their own particular problems. However, they continued to subscribe to their traditional expectations of "proper" police practice. It can be argued, therefore, that in important respects aspects of public demand are "untutored", idiosyncratic and in many cases naive.

Supply: Procedures and Characteristics

The police response to calls from the public generally involves a number of officers: the radio controller, the uniformed patrol officer

who attends calls for assistance, and on occasion the detective officer.

Two distinct elements underlie the policy guiding the actions of police radio controllers. First, a "clear desk" policy prevails in that an attempt is always made to respond to incidents as soon as they are reported and in a way that will bring them to a close as swiftly as possible. It is clearly against the philosophy underpinning the controllers' work to keep an incident open to see how it develops, or to keep several incidents under observation at the same time. Those attempting to do so are actively discouraged by supervisory staff, their working environment and the facilities at their disposal. The second element follows from this. Given the uncertainty surrounding many incidents, a general belief prevails in the wisdom of sending a uniformed officer to all incidents, "just in case". As a result, the controllers themselves make little attempt to classify the degree of risk associated with reported incidents and, given the quality of public reporting, it is difficult to see how they might do this. The justification for this approach rests on the view that controllers must be prepared for the "major incident" by being in a position to muster full patrol strength at a moment's notice. The control room, therefore, particularly where centrally organised, is prepared primarily for crisis rather than routine.

Policies such as these undoubtedly shape the response of the controller to individual calls for assistance. Despite the haphazard and "untutored" nature of calls, controllers were found largely to accept the demands made upon them by the public. It was rare, for example, for callers to find themselves rebuked for using the emergency communication system for trivial matters, told that their request was too insignificant to warrant attention or that it fell beyond the responsibility of the police and so was being referred to another agency. The far more likely outcome was for controllers to accept the definition of the incident given to them by callers as a basis for further action, and for the latter to be left with the impression that the police would take responsibility and bring the matter to a satisfactory conclusion.

From prior consideration of their position at the hub of communications between callers, patrols and supervisory officers, controllers might be expected to exercise discretion and make decisions about the appropriate distribution of police resources in response to demand. In practice they appear to act largely as messengers bearing information from the public to patrols.

The service offered by the patrol officer attending a call can be assessed in two ways. First, in terms of clearly recognised operational tasks (e.g., arrest of offenders, and the resolution of problems), and second, in terms of activities of a social/psychological nature (e.g., reassuring the public). The policy of sending a police vehicle to virtually every case can be justified on a number of grounds. However, the present study has shown that in only 33% of incidents studied did the patrol officer attending conclusively resolve or alleviate—if only temporarily—the initial problem, thereby completing a task which might be organised as a tangible outcome of his intervention. Police action falling into this category included, for example, making an arrest, "moving on" troublesome youths, gaining entry to locked premises and dealing with gas leaks and similar problems. For some 37% of incidents the activities of the police were limited to those of an "informed observer" (giving information, rejecting responsibility or referring the problem elsewhere), or to administrative work (preparing reports, referring an incident for subsequent investigation, or checking that some action had been taken by others). For a variety of reasons—mainly associated with the incident rather than police performance—police attendance at the remaining 30% of incidents achieved virtually nothing.

An entirely different picture emerges if the service offered by the uniformed officer is assessed in terms of public satisfaction. An assessment of this shows that a substantial proportion (75%) of those calling the police were well satisfied with the way in which the police responded.[3] The question arises, therefore, as to the source of this satisfaction since it clearly cannot arise from the achievement of tangible goals.

On arriving at an incident, uniformed police officers devote much time to bringing to order a recently disordered situation and allaying the fears of the caller. This is achieved by arriving moderately quickly (or where delay occurred by explaining it in terms of involvement with other more serious crime matters), by arriving in a marked police vehicle, by taking statements in a quiet and courteous way, by listening to public grievances and, on occasions, searching the premises for the burglar who

might "still be lurking upstairs". The police behave, therefore, in accordance with the public expectations already described and as a result bring reassurance to the public. It is from this aspect of police work that public satisfaction stems. Dissatisfaction with the service, where it existed at all, was found to focus not on the failure to resolve problems or catch criminals, but upon the reluctance of uniformed officers (when on patrol or in the control room) to prolong initial contacts with members of the public, for example by paying a return visit or making a phone call at some later date to inform them of progress made in dealing with the case. Members of the CID were particularly criticised for adopting a pragmatic operational approach with the resulting neglect of social matters.

In summary, the service provided by the police, while limited with regard to the attainment of tangible objectives, appeared remarkably successful in bringing reassurance to those calling for assistance. Public satisfaction rests upon this achievement: public dissatisfaction stems from the unwillingness on the part of the police to devote sufficient attention to social matters or to maintain sustained contact with the public over a prolonged period of time. As far as the police are concerned, the system operates in a way compatible with the crime fighting image of police work prevalent amongst junior officers, while at the same time serving to protect senior staff from the accusation of not meeting public needs (Manning, 1977). Demand and supply are therefore matched in terms of realised expectations, and high levels of public satisfaction result within a system which works to the benefit not only of the public but also of the police.

Proposals for Change

Although not foremost in the minds of those calling the police the apparent failure of traditional policing strategies to control the level of crime in the community remains a matter of concern (Clarke and Hough, 1980). For some, developments in computer technology have been seen as the salvation of policing. Unfortunately, the tree of technology seems to be bearing little fruit. Kelling (1978) has argued, for example, that with few exceptions there is little or no evidence that any technological device has significantly improved the effectiveness of the police service. Indeed, he has suggested that the introduction of such devices has on occasions resulted in a deterioration in the quality of the service received by the public. At the risk of over-simplification, the principal benefit of technological innovation seems to lie in doing "more of the same faster": given the limited effectiveness of traditional policing tactics—a characteristic arising primarily from the nature of crime itself (Clarke and Heal, 1979)—such a process is unlikely to lead to the control of crime.

An alternative approach is to direct police efforts solely to crime matters by managing and filtering public demand for police assistance, thereby relieving the police of the responsibility of attending calls of a social service nature. Such an approach may take a number of forms, the most obvious being to place the task of demand management in the hands of the radio controller.

Looking at the American literature it is clear that some police forces and researchers have given much thought to the development and implementation of more effective ways of managing demands (Grassie *et al.*, 1978; Sumrall *et al.*, 1979). Under these schemes incoming calls are classified according to specific characteristics (e.g., urgency) and the controller, drawing on a range of responses, may ask the caller to submit a written report, call in person at the police station, deal with the matter over the phone, or take their inquiry to an alternative agency. The proposed scheme is seen to facilitate the work both of the patrol officer and the controller: the patrol officer is given more time to develop pro-active policing strategies, while for the controller the chances of "overloading" the capacity of the police to respond at peak times are considerably reduced.

Unfortunately the deficiencies of the proposed system are equally obvious. There are three points here. First, looking at the practical aspects of the scheme, classification is most easily developed where related to clearly defined needs or objectives and where it is made on the basis of reliable information which itself is not open to alternative interpretations (Manning, 1978). From the present study it is questionable whether radio controllers can classify calls with sufficient accuracy at an early stage in their history to enable them to select the appropriate response. Additionally, there is the strong possibility that any system of incident classification adopted by radio controllers will in practice be more suited to the operational or

the administrative needs of the police than to the needs of the public.

Secondly, it is possible that demand management will lead more generally to a deterioration in the quality of some aspects of the service received by the public. At present the public appear to value greatly the willingness of the police to attend most calls for assistance and the support they receive from the police during times of personal crisis. It seems likely that the introduction of demand management will result in a considerably smaller proportion of those calling the police receiving the help they feel they require. As far as callers interviewed in the present study were concerned, strong resentment was expressed at any proposal that their requests for assistance might be dealt with by phone, through the preparation of written reports, by civilian members of staff or by their calling in person at the police station when next passing.

Finally, it is at least questionable whether demand management will lead to gains in the area of crime control. It is, of course, possible that members of the public could, initially at least, be persuaded to accept alternative police response tactics (c.f Tien and Valiante 1979; Pate *et al.*, 1979). It would be a comparatively simple matter, for example, for the controller to justify delay in responding to a call, or indeed not responding at all, in terms of the need to conserve scarce police resources for "real" crime matters. Yet, given the limited effectiveness of traditional policing tactics, the question must arise as to how the time made available to the police through the introduction of demand management is to be used (Sweeney and Illingsworth, 1973). In short, it seems that while it may eventually prove possible to persuade the public to accept alternative responses, in its present form at least the introduction of demand management will not necessarily result in gains in crime control. If this is so, and to put the argument crudely, there seems little point in reconstituting a central part of police practice when by doing so may achieve little by way of crime control yet jeopardise a task at present being performed well.

Conclusion

It is, of course, possible that some of the difficulties noted above would, in time, be overcome. Nevertheless, it cannot be overlooked that the introduction of rational/labour-saving dispatching policies, while conserving police manpower, will probably result in fewer members of the public receiving the assistance they undoubtedly need in times of personal crisis. The costs of such policies are difficult to assess yet they should probably be measured in terms of the loss of public confidence in the police, a reduction in their support for police activities—as noted by Steenhuis (1980) in regard to the Dutch context (Steenhuis, 1980)—and in increases in public fear of crime (Léauté, 1980).

It is untenable to argue that the present system needs no amendment. Clearly this is not so. Yet current proposals for the management of public demand are surprisingly parochial. It is suggested that before an effective system of managing demand can be devised three related areas of preparatory work must be completed. First, it is necessary to assess the needs of those individual members of the public calling the police; the present study has shown that the immediate and short term need is for someone to intervene and restore order to a difficult situation. Yet it is also true that the public as a whole have a concern regarding the control of the level of crime through the achievement of tangible objectives. Second, those responsible for planning and implementing change must understand fully what the police can and cannot achieve. It has been argued that the police are successful in helping the public cope with distressing situations, and it is probably true that they deal successfully with spectacular incidents. They are notably less successful in controlling the commoner forms of crime. Third, it is necessary to match public needs with police skills, and where no match exists to search out alternative and appropriate responses. For some incidents this may amount to no more than seeking out appropriate ways of supporting victims both economically and socially and, as a corollary, to minimise the social damage that can arise from inept response. In other areas the outlook may be more optimistic.

Some types of crime or conflict for example, might be controlled through the development of specific styles of policing—such as community policing or the use of specialist squads, or through improvements in community planning, and better management of leisure and recreational facilities (Alderson, 1979; Engstad and Evans 1980).

The transition from one system of respond-

ing to public demand to another brings with it a number of risks. Of these the most obvious is the danger of undermining the public's confidence in the police service, a development likely to weaken the ability of the police to support the public in times of personal crisis. Reorganisation of the dispatch process must, therefore, proceed with caution, each area of demand being considered in turn and appropriate responses devised (Goldstein, 1979). Given that current knowledge of public needs is at best partial, and understanding of police/public interaction limited, to proceed otherwise is to endanger the benefits which do accrue from the present system.

Footnotes

1. At the time of the study the force had a police strength of some 2,000 officers, and a 'clear-up' rate of 44%. The annual crime rate of the area it served stood at 56 crimes per 1,000 population. In these respects the force approached national average figures.
2. Given the variety of reasons influencing public action and the subjective nature of the information no attempt has been made to quantify this material.
3. These figures are similar to those found in more general surveys of the public (cf. Belson, 1978; Mori, 1980).

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