



Police Reform and Public Attitudes to Police Performance: Doing Better and Feeling Worse?



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Background

There have been numerous reforms to policing in England and Wales during the last two decades, including some specifically aimed at increasing public confidence in the police. In particular, ethnic minority groups have been mistrustful of the police.

Up to now there has been no systematic review of the impact of reforms on public attitudes to policing.

Did succeeding waves of reform result in increased public confidence in the police in England and Wales, particularly for ethnic minority groups? And did the introduction of central performance targets for police in the 1990s result in a noticeable change in the reported experience of crime victims and a willingness to report crimes?

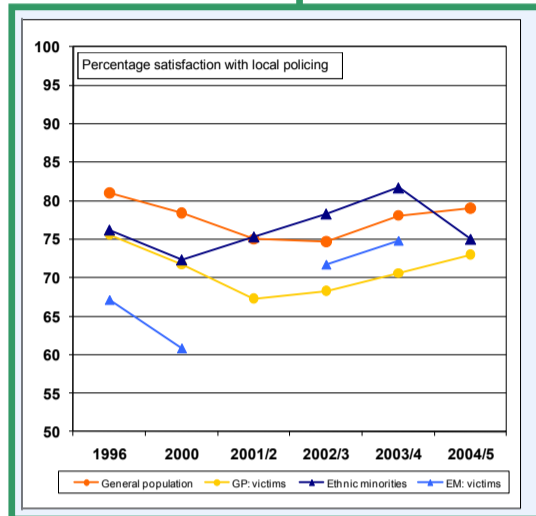


Figure 1
Positive public perception of local policing among victims and non-victims, by ethnic minority and core population

What We Did

We analysed BCS data pertaining to three key periods of police reforms in England and Wales. In each instance, surveys from just before and just after the reform event were scrutinised for evidence of changing public perceptions or experiences of policing.

We combined BCS datasets from 1988 to 2003/4 to test whether, after controlling for a range of variables, there was a statistically significant difference in perceptions towards local area policing compared to the national average.

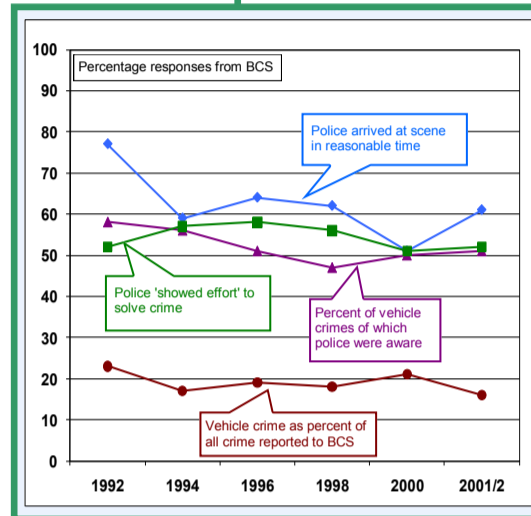


Figure 2
Victims' opinions of police response to vehicle crime (data from British Crime Survey)

Aims

Using the British Crime Survey (BCS)—a survey of public experience of crime and policing conducted in England and Wales since 1982—we aimed to explore how operational and organisational reforms to the police service since the 1980s affected public perceptions of the police service, including:

- changes in patterns of crime reporting, in particular the type of incidents reported to the police
- any discernible effect on victims and non-victims' perceptions of the police.
- whether and how public perceptions of the police varied significantly between police areas.

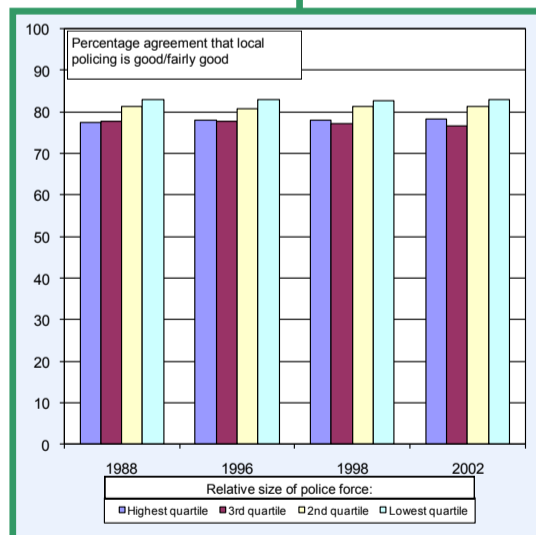


Figure 3
Higher levels of public satisfaction with police performance were found in police forces with fewer officers per head of population.

Findings

Attempts to improve relations with ethnic minorities appeared to have succeeded. By 2001/2, the satisfaction of people from ethnic minorities with policing resembled that of the general population and, by 2002/3, was higher (Figure 1). By 2003/4, there was also a narrowing of the gap in perceptions between victims and non-victims for the ethnic minority population.

New public management of policing coincided with - and certainly did not reverse - a decline in the reporting of incidents and a deterioration in the overall public perception of police effort (Figure 2).

Evidence of a direct effect of police resources on public ratings of the police was not clear cut. We found that in PFAs with lower ratios of police per head of population, local policing often received a better rating (Fig. 3). But the pattern was less clear with respect to changes in the relative size of police forces and public ratings (Fig. 4).

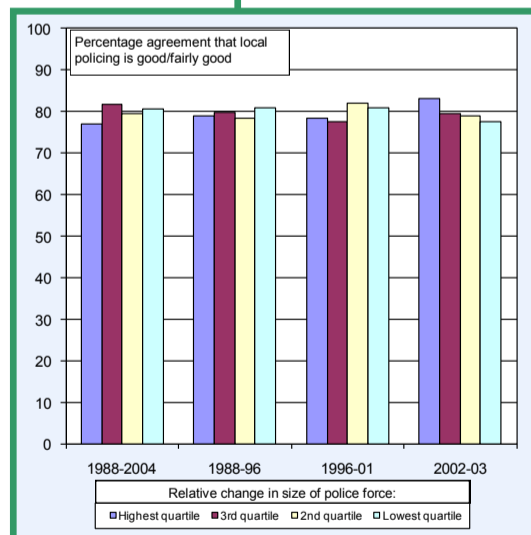


Figure 4
Public satisfaction with police performance showed no clear dependence on changes in relative size of police force

Find out more...



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