The Police and Public Opinion in Britain

WESLEY G. SKOGAN
Northwestern University

This article examines opinion about the police in Britain. Surveys of opinion about the police have become integral to the assessment of agency performance there. Central government policy calls for the development of a "customer orientation" among police forces, and national and local surveys could play a significant role in monitoring this shift toward greater police accountability to the public. Surveys in Britain have documented dramatic shifts in public satisfaction with policing and detailed data on specific sources of discontent about their performance. They have also examined popular assessments of what the police should be focusing their attention on, as a guide to setting police priorities. This article reviews these trends and the implications of the findings for policing.

In Britain, public opinion surveys play an increasing role in monitoring and guiding police accountability. Some of these surveys have been national in scope, but local police forces in England and Wales (there are a total of 43) are also conducting surveys to gauge the public's views of what police priorities should be and what their experiences with police have been. Not all of the news that comes from these surveys is good. During the 1980s, the British Crime Survey (BCS) and other surveys documented a sharp decline in public satisfaction with police and in their respect for the occupation. Trust in the police has declined, as has confidence in the legal system generally. Both national and local force surveys point to the same conclusion and document disproportionate declines in satisfaction with policing among racial minorities.

This article summarizes the findings of a number of the most recent British surveys. What I refer to as Britain in this context actually includes just England and Wales, for Scotland has a different legal tradition and separately organized policing. (For a report on public attitudes toward police in Scotland, see Allen & Payne, 1991.) There is a review of trends in satisfaction with British policing and evidence from the surveys about the specific sources of public discontent with police work. The article also examines popular assessments of where the police *should* be focusing their attention. The results put police administrators in somewhat of a conundrum, for they have to make harder choices than the British public is willing to make about their priorities.

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OPINION SURVEYS IN BRITAIN

There is far more repeated and systematic research on public opinion about policing in Britain than there is in the United States (for reviews, see Hough, 1989; Reiner, 1992). This reflects national policy and illustrates the fact that funding and administrative control over the police is much more nationalized in Britain than in the United States.

The Tory government's "Citizen's Charter" initiative calls for "customer-client" relationships between agencies of government and the general public. One administrative mechanism for carrying this out is the government's Audit Commission. It has established quantitative standards and performance indicators for all manner of agencies, including local police forces, and they have been published on a recurring basis since 1993. For example, the Service Charter for the London police calls for them to answer at least 80% of all emergency calls within 15 seconds and to arrive at the scene of urgent calls within 12 minutes at least 75% of the time. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC), the central government body that provides detailed oversight of local policing, gathers and publishes an additional list of indicators of agency performance. Some of Britain's 43 police forces publish the results of these measures on World Wide Web pages accessible on the Internet. Most of the measures now in use reflect agency activity, but work is continuing on the development of performance indicators that measure the efficacy of crime prevention strategies as well (Tilley, 1995).

Police and other agencies also make use of an additional oversight mechanism, opinion polling. Occasional national surveys are carried out by central government bodies such as the Complaints Task Force, which monitors how effectively the complaints of dissatisfied agency clients are handled. Their surveys have found that the police are comparatively ineffective at responding to citizens' complaints ("Complaining," 1995). In 1989, a consortium of the three major associations representing police officers of all ranks sponsored their own survey of public perceptions and expectations about the police (Joint Consultative Committee, 1990). In 1993, the Audit Commission surveyed the public and asked them to rate how important various police activities were in forming their opinion of local police (Market Opinion Research International, 1993a). The British Crime Survey, which is a recurring national study, monitors popular attitudes toward the police and the experiences of those who call them or who are stopped by police on the street. It is conducted by the Home Office Research and Planning Unit, a research arm of the national government. Finally, in order to gather data on customer satisfaction, which is required by the Audit Commission and HMIC, local police forces sponsor surveys of their own. Together, these surveys paint a more coherent picture of national and local opinion about police than exists in the United States.

TRENDS IN GENERAL SATISFACTION

BCS surveys between 1982 and 1988 found that the percentage of people who rated the performance of their local police as "very good" dropped from 43% to 25%. The widespread nature of this decline was perhaps as important as its magnitude. Compared to earlier surveys, the 1988 BCS found confidence had declined among broad categories of people who in the past had been generally supportive of the police. These included women, the elderly, Whites, and residents of small towns and rural areas (Skogan, 1990). To monitor these startling trends, the Home Office quickly commissioned six additional national polls between 1988 and 1992, in addition to the 1992 BCS (Southgate & Crisp, 1992). These polls pointed to a stabilization of confidence in police at or just below the 1988 level. During the 1990-1992 period, BCS, British census, and Gallup surveys put the percentage of people rating the police as "very good" in the 23% to 27% range (Skogan, 1994).

These trends are mirrored in other surveys. Beginning in 1985, yearly polls for the London police revealed that the percentage of London residents reporting that police in their area do a very good job began to drift downward. This decline was fueled primarily by decreasing levels of dissatisfaction among Blacks (Research Services, 1993). National surveys by a commercial firm, which asked if respondents were satisfied or dissatisfied with "the way your area is policed," also found a drop in satisfaction during the same period: In 1981, 75% were satisfied; in 1985, 67%; and in 1987, 59%. By January 1993, the percentage who were satisfied had dropped to 51% but then rebounded to 59% (Market Opinion Research International, 1993b, 1994). Between April 1989 and January 1994, the percentage of Britons who agreed with the statement "I feel I can trust the police" declined from 75% to 66% (Market Opinion Research International, 1994).

SPECIFIC SOURCES OF SATISFACTION AND DISSATISFACTION

Although general patterns of satisfaction with policing and especially their trends may be informative, it is more useful for policymakers to examine the views of the public concerning specific features of policing. There are two general approaches to this task. The first is to present respondents with lists of various police activities or functions and ask how satisfied they are with them. The second is to examine actual experiences that people have with the police to determine what features of those contacts satisfy or dissatisfy them. Both approaches can be illustrated with findings from the 1992 BCS, the most recent to be released.

PUBLIC VIEWS OF POLICE ACTIVITY

The 1992 BCS gave respondents a long list of police activities and asked how good a job police in their area did on each of them (Skogan, 1994). The results are summarized in Table 1. The second column of Table 1 examines a "net good" performance rating that subtracts the percentage rating the police as "fairly poor" or "very poor" from the percentage rating the police as "good" or "very good" on a long list of activities. "Don't know" responses (which are discussed below) were not included in the calculation. Overall, the police were thought to do a particularly good job at dealing with crowds at sporting and public events, at dealing with serious motoring offenses, and at responding to accidents and medical emergencies. Police received middling scores on their handling of rowdy or loutish and drunken behavior and on their ability to keep traffic flowing smoothly. In general, people who drove a great deal or had been stopped by police and people who were self-reported heavy drinkers were less satisfied about traffic enforcement; the latter group was also dissatisfied with police handling of disorderly behavior.

On the other hand, routine police patrolling is a job about which the British public has very mixed opinions. Only 20% thought that police did a good job at vehicular patrol, and only 8% thought they did a very good job at foot patrol; 29% thought they did a fairly poor job at foot patrol and 32%, a very poor job. In general, big-city residents and people who were worried about crime were more likely to be dissatisfied with patrolling. There was a strong positive correlation between how satisfied respondents were with police patrols and their recalling having recently seen an officer patrolling on foot.

The 1992 BCS also gave a low rating to police effectiveness in controlling burglary. This is significant because surveys find that the British public ranks burglary as one of the most serious *and* common crimes. Surveys by Gallup in 1983 and 1992 found that public confidence in the ability of the police to solve burglaries dropped over the period (Gallup, 1992). BCS respondents scored police somewhat higher in their capacity to deal with violent crime, and Gallup surveys find that public confidence in this aspect of police performance has been stable. In 1992, police received middling marks for how well they handled giving crime prevention advice (25% thought they did a very good job) but scored considerably lower in terms of the aid they proffer to victims (13%) and their ability to work with community groups (14%).

One difficulty with these survey-based performance measures is that, inevitably, there are broad areas about which ordinary citizens are uninformed. They often know little about how the police are organized and what they are doing, much less how well they are doing it. In the absence of any direct experience with them, their views of policing are shaped in a major way by the mass media (Skogan, 1990). In the BCS and other surveys, substantial percentages of respondents indicate they do not know how good a job police do at particular tasks. "Don't know" responses are more common among people who have little recent experience with crime or the police, whereas victims and those who have contacted or been stopped by police are much more likely to have an opinion.

TABLE 1: Ratings of Aspects of Police Performance

Attitudes Toward Police Service Delivery	*Net Good (good-poor)*	*Percentage Don't Know*
Responding to accidents and medical emergencies	86	6
Controlling crowds at sporting and public events	71	12
Dealing with serious motoring offenses	60	8
Giving advice on how to prevent crime	45	11
Keeping traffic moving smoothly	50	7
Detecting and arresting people involved in violent crime	48	16
Patrolling the streets in police cars	44	6
Dealing with rowdy, loutish, and drunken behavior	45	12
Working with groups in the community	27	21
Providing help and support to victims of crime	26	28
Dealing with white-collar crime	25	31
Detecting and arresting burglars	1	14
Patrolling the streets on foot	-28	7

Source: Skogan, 1994. Net Good column subtracts the percentage rating the police as fairly poor or very poor from the percentage rating the police as good or very good. Responses are ranked by the percentage responding "very good."

PUBLIC EXPERIENCES WITH POLICE

An alternative approach to gauging the public's views of policing is to ask those who have had contact with them to rate officers' performance on some fairly specific criteria. This approach can reveal characteristics of police behavior that are linked to satisfaction with specific encounters, suggesting which dimensions of police behavior are shaping public opinion. These results are quite important to police forces in Britain, which recognize the impact of their manner on public attitudes. For example, the mission statement of the London police (their "Statement of Common Purpose and Values") posits that officers must provide "protection and reassurance to Londoners, and to be compassionate, courteous and patient" (cited in Stephens, 1994, p. 239).

In the BCS, respondents are quizzed to determine if they have had any contact with police during the year preceding the interview. If they have, they are asked a sequence of detailed questions about the encounter, and they respond to rating scales that register how satisfied they were with how the police handled the matter. Among contacts initiated by the public during 1991, the greatest pool of discontent with police service was among people who contacted them to report a crime; about one third of them were dissatisfied with how police handled their case, as were about 20% of those who contacted them to report a disturbance, a ringing alarm, or a suspicious circumstance (below described as "potential crime" contacts). Those contacting the police to ask for information or to give them information were generally pleased with how they were treated (Skogan, 1994).

Four factors stood out as important determinants of citizen satisfaction with these encounters:

Being kept informed. Only one quarter of crime victims or reporters of potential crimes felt they were kept informed by the police. By a large margin, their biggest complaint was not being kept informed.

Being treated politely. Nationally, about 70% of those contacting the police thought they were treated very politely, and very few thought police were actually impolite. However, Blacks and especially Asians were disproportionately dissatisfied with how their encounter was handled.

Perceived levels of effort. About two thirds of crime victims thought police gave their complaint as much effort as they should have, and only slightly more of those reporting suspicious activity felt better on this dimension.

Police interest in their story. About 70% of respondents reporting something to the police felt the police had paid sufficient attention to what they had to say, but among those who did not, three quarters were dissatisfied with how the police handled their case.

These findings suggest that new measures to keep people informed about what happened as a result of their contact would pay significant dividends in terms of rebuilding public confidence in the police. Likewise, the effort that the police put into many cases goes unobserved by the general public, and finding ways to bring those efforts to public notice would both keep them informed and reassure them that there is real interest in tackling the problems they face. The 1988 BCS report on policing called for new efforts to refocus officers' attention on the importance of the care and aid that they dispense, along with rewarding their technical proficiency, in order to speak to the concerns of a public that is relying on their support in increasing numbers.

Another set of encounters with the public are initiated by the police. During 1992, about 16% of BCS respondents were involved in vehicular stops and about 3% were stopped while on foot. Traffic-related encounters seem to have been handled routinely; most drivers were given reasons for being stopped, few were searched, and most escaped without formal sanction. The more ambiguous circumstances under which many pedestrian stops took place could also be seen in the survey; they more often were stopped for reasons that people thought were unrelated to an offense, the police less frequently gave reasons for the stop, and they made more searches. But at the same time, perhaps because they were less routinized, police actually paid more attention to what people had to say and arrested or otherwise sanctioned them less often subsequent to a pedestrian stop.

Being treated fairly and politely and perceiving that police showed interest in what they had to say were the factors most closely linked to satisfaction with the outcomes of police-initiated encounters. Perhaps inevitably, pedestrian stops seemed more unfair and the police involved in them were viewed as more impolite. In general, it was young, single, unemployed Black men who were more frequently the targets of stops of all kinds and were more likely to feel that they were treated unfairly when they were stopped. A series of Home Office surveys found that Blacks were 4 times more likely to be stopped than were Whites (Southgate & Crisp, 1992).

PRIORITIES FOR POLICE

British surveys frequently ask respondents to set priorities for the police. For example, a 1990 national survey gave respondents a list of problems and asked them to select up to five offenses they thought "the police should spend most time and energy trying to fight" (Joint Consultative Committee, 1990). There are several difficulties with this approach, and differences among the surveys make it difficult to compare their findings.

The first difficulty is that local problems vary. Surveys probing the nature of local problems find that they vary considerably—as they should—from place to place as well as from time to time. Research has documented that there is tremendous interarea variation in the type, intensity, and mix of local problems and that many of them display a marked seasonal pattern. This extensive variation in the nature of local problems is one reason for recommending local force surveys, particularly surveys large enough to speak to further differences among important subareas within the region.

For example, a 1994 survey for the Greater Manchester Police involved 100 interviews (still a small number) in each of the force's 13 divisions. It found that the percentage of residents rating "burglary and theft" the "single most serious problem" in their area ranged from 2% to 22%. The range for "street crime" was from less than 1% to 22%, car crime 13% to 28%, and "young people hanging/driving around" from 5% to 24% (Research Services, 1994). In the Manchester survey, areas that were most concerned about burglary tended to give a low ranking to street crime and vice versa. Both in Britain and in the United States there is considerable interest in how the police can organize to more easily discover and be responsive to such local variation.

It is also important to note that the nature of the problems included on these lists, and how questions are phrased, help frame the conclusions that can be drawn from a survey. As we shall see below, it is hard to not give top priority to the police "responding to emergencies," as uninformative as that response might be. The 1990 national survey presented respondents with a broad range of problems, from "litter and rubbish lying around" to street robbery; other lists might not be so inclusive. On the other hand, the question asked about police priorities described the entire list of candidate problems as "offenses," so the issue of whether they fell within what the respondent envisioned to be the legitimate boundaries of the police mandate was determined by the interviewer. When allowed to make up their own mind, respondents may come to different conclusions (Joint Consultative Committee, 1990).

In a survey of Sussex residents, on the other hand, respondents were presented with a list of selected problems that were not described as offenses and were

asked, "Should the police deal with them?" Although there was some variation, responses largely fell into three categories: a long list of conventional policing problems, which mostly drew "yes" responses regardless of their seriousness or frequency; a shorter list of environmental problems outside the limits of the traditional police mandate (e.g., "litter"), which mostly drew "no" responses; and a few traffic regulation issues (e.g., "heavy lorries"), which fell in between (Shapland, Wiles, & Leek, 1990). This and other surveys suggest that traffic control is low on the public's agenda for the police. One national survey found that respondents gave enforcement of traffic regulations and maintenance of road safety only half the importance they gave to preventing crime, and these activities fell to the bottom of a list of several police functions when respondents were asked to prioritize them (Joint Consultative Committee, 1990).

Polling *might* be able to document new trends in public concern if appropriate response questions and categories are included in the surveys. For example, surveys for the London police identified a tremendous surge of concern about car theft, beginning in the early 1990s. Among London residents, it stood above vandalism and mugging as the most important problem in their area (Research Services, 1993). However, this finding depended on the capacity of researchers to anticipate unanticipated problems. By their very nature, inexpensive mass surveys must rely on pre-established questions and precoded response categories. They are a more useful tool for confirming ideas than for discovering them.

Another reason for being cautious about the use of surveys is that they can make it very easy for the public to request more of almost everything. In early 1994, 87% of the public wanted "more police on the beat" (Market Opinion Research International, 1994). Surveys document that the public expect police to take responsibility for a broad range of problems when their responses are unconstrained by resource limits and they are not forced to consider the different kinds of resources required by different problems. One common approach to this problem is to present respondents with a list of "things which the police do, or might do," and let them choose only a few as high-priority activities.

The preceding approach was taken in the surveys summarized in Table 2. It presents the proportion of respondents lending a limited number of "votes" (in most cases, five) to each activity on a list. The surveys were conducted in four London divisions and West Mercia. In addition, Table 2 reports findings of a similar national survey. Each survey included a few other lower priority activities; Table 2 describes only those activities common to most of the surveys.

The most striking finding in Table 2 is the high level of support for foot patrol. In every jurisdiction, this was ranked above responding quickly to calls and, except nationally, above investigating crimes and detecting and arresting offenders. Of course, it is likely that respondents think that foot patrol would improve police capabilities on those dimensions, too, but the gap between foot patrol and the priority given to car patrols, which do not garner much support at all, indicates that there is something particularly appealing about foot beats. Reactive "999" policing (the telephone number in the United States is 911) also

TABLE 2: Summary of Priority Activities for Police

Percentage Ranking Among Top Five Police Priorities	*Brixton 1984*	*Kilburn 1985*	*Richmond 1993*	*West Mercia 1991*	*Hounslow 1993*	*National 1990*
Responding quickly to						
emergencies	—	—	—	86	—	87
calls	72	65	69	—	—	—
Patrolling on foot	78	75	74	66	73	60
Detecting and arresting offenders	61	53	—	59	—	70
Investigating crime	—	—	47	66	35	68
Getting to know local people	69	61	—	51	42	30
Work with/visit local schools	31	35	23	40	44	22
Help and support for crime victims	49	57	10	30	31	33
Giving crime prevention advice	40[a]	35[a]	15	31	31	27
Patrolling in cars	19	20	15	27	30	24

Note: Richmond allowed "3-2" main priorities; National ranked all activities and reports here the top-ranked five; the remainder allowed up to five choices. Dash indicates that question was not asked.

a. prevention question was "teaching locals to help themselves."

Sources: Social and Community Planning Research, 1984a (Brixton) and 1984b (Kilburn); Market Opinion Research International, 1993c (Richmond); Harris Research Centre, 1991 (West Mercia); Metropolitan Police and London Borough of Hounslow, 1994 (Hounslow); Joint Consultative Committee, 1990 (National).

garners a high level of support, a finding replicated in several local crime surveys (for example, immediate responses to 999 calls was the highest priority of residents of Islington; Jones, MacLean, & Young, 1986). The high rating given in many jurisdictions to police "getting to know local people" also points to a great desire on the part of the public for more hands-on policing that responds to the local community. For all the dissatisfaction of victims, Table 2 indicates that the public at large gives somewhat lower priority to victim support and crime prevention than it does to other policing efforts.

The strong feelings the public has for foot patrol can be found in virtually every national and regional survey that has examined the issue. The public is the most dissatisfied about this aspect of police performance, and they give it a high priority when they are asked to rank police priorities. In the surveys, visibility of foot officers is positively correlated with general measures of satisfaction with policing, as are measures of satisfaction with levels of foot patrol in the community. Satisfaction with foot patrol is also related to reduced fear of crime (especially street crime and vandalism). The 1992 BCS found that 7% of respondents recalled having seen a police officer patrolling on foot very recently ("today or yesterday") and that about 20% saw one within the past week. Foot patrols were more visible in inner city and metropolitan areas throughout England and Wales, and especially in inner London. However, the positive

effects of visible foot patrol were reserved for Whites and Asians. Blacks (and young men) most frequently recalled seeing an officer on foot, but—mirroring their generally less satisfactory encounters with them—visible foot patrol had no reassuring effects on these two groups.

An alternate approach to police priority setting is to focus on problems rather than processes. The surveys reviewed above generally examined public support for specific kinds of police *activities*; another set of questions essentially asked, What are the most important *problems* for police to concentrate on? A review of national and regional surveys of opinion about police priorities (e.g., Harris Research Centre, 1991, 1992; Joint Consultative Committee, 1990) indicates a fair degree of consensus about the most important concerns. Sexual assaults and burglary ranked highly, followed by drunk driving, vandalism, and robbery.

These surveys also indicate that there is no direct relationship between how frequently people thought problems occurred and the priority they gave them. For example, in West Mercia respondents were asked if each problem on a long list happened a great deal, a fair amount, not very much, or not at all. Sexual assaults and drunk driving were ranked among the least frequently occurring problems but were among the public's top priorities for police attention. The most common offenses registered in West Mercia (dog fouling, rubbish and litter, and parking offenses) were ranked very low as priorities. On the other hand, burglary, vandalism, and vehicle-related thefts were highly rated concerns *and* were considered to be fairly common problems, a juxtaposition of opinions that should be taken seriously in priority setting (Harris Research Centre, 1991).

A final reason for being cautious about the role of surveys in setting operational priorities is that a large proportion—some think too large a proportion—of the police agenda is reactive, set in response to 999 calls and other incidents as they are reported. In this sense, the public is already setting priorities for police and controlling a significant percentage of their resources. Many police forces have been experimenting with schemes to match some requests for service with alternative modes of response or to divert them to other agencies. These graded response policies are a tactical reaction to mounting police workloads, and they have been justified in part by the large fraction of calls that are of a nonemergency, noncrime character. There might be some role for opinion research on priorities for load shedding, but the bulk of the candidate incidents (for example, long-completed burglaries or accidents not posing a threat to life) have not yet been included in surveys of public priorities for policing.

CONCLUSIONS

In contrast to the United States, what is striking about Britain is the sheer availability of high-quality survey data suited for examining both trends in public satisfaction and the specific sources of public discontent with the quality of police service. In the United States, by contrast, there are only scattered

national poll data about the police and virtually no interest in collecting any at the local level. National polls are almost always conducted in response to some crisis, such as the Rodney King episode or the Mark Fuhrman testimony in Los Angeles. As a result, when questions are asked about police, they are not consistent across time. The major government survey asking about crime and justice issues, the National Crime Victimization Survey, does not ask any questions about police performance or public satisfaction, except among crime victims. The difference between the two countries clearly is a political one: unlike the United States, central government in Britain plays a major role in funding and administering the police. As a result the police there get caught up in national political agendas, such as the conservative government's thrust for greater efficiency and responsiveness by municipal service bureaucracies. Surveys are one of the most important ways of gauging customer satisfaction with products that are not sold competitively, and this includes police services.

The image of British policing that emerges from these surveys is one of a public that wants police to focus on traditional crime concerns: serious violent crimes, burglary, and vehicle-related thefts. They want the police to come rapidly when mobilized. At the same time, they want more direct, hands-on contact with the police. In my judgment, the popularity of foot patrol probably is based on how it bridges these two quite different concerns. The surveys also warn that the belief that local forces are letting speed of response degrade would likely be a source of trouble. However, the Joint Consultative Committee's 1990 report found both that responding rapidly to calls should be a high priority and that three quarters of all respondents thought that all crimes deserve equal attention. Clearly, this is an unrealistic juxtaposition. Likewise, the issue of foot patrol highlights the potential clash between popular and administrative concerns. Foot patrol is expensive to mount, it is often in competition for staffing with other highly rated activities (e.g., responding quickly to 999 calls), and it does not register well on traditional performance indexes such as making arrests and clearing up crimes. Foot patrol presents a hard set of choices for police forces pressed on one side to reduce costs and to control the growth of personnel and on the other to respond to the expectations of the public.

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