

The impact of police numbers on crime rates

While studies have examined the relationship between police numbers and crime, they have generally not looked at what the officers were doing at the time. The 'what works' evidence would suggest that the police could reduce crime simply by spending more time on effective activities, and less time on ineffective activities, without increasing the total officer numbers (see [Targeted approaches to crime and disorder reduction](#)).

A recent review of the literature commissioned by HMIC concluded that there was not enough evidence to say that higher numbers of police officers was the direct cause of lower levels of crime (Bradford 2011). Despite consistency in some more recent research, almost all the studies reviewed by Bradford were said to suffer from limitations which made their findings inconclusive. Nevertheless, while no single study was found to provide robust evidence of a cause-and-effect relationship, the review highlighted that the studies, when taken together, pointed to the potential for police numbers to be negatively associated with at least some forms of recorded crime, so when police numbers were higher, crime would be lower. This potential association was found particularly in relation to property and other acquisitive crime. It was estimated that a 10 percent increase in officers was likely to be associated with a reduction in property crime of around 3 percent (Levitt 1997). In comparison, the evidence of an association between police numbers and violent crime was found to be weaker and sometimes contradictory.

Many of the studies included in Bradford's (2011) review provided evidence of the impact of one-off and large-scale changes in police deployment under unique circumstances – usually short, sharp increases or reductions in visible numbers due to police strikes or terrorist attacks. For example, there is evidence that a large-scale and widely advertised temporary reduction in police numbers due to a strike is associated with increased crime (Makinen and Takala 1980). Conversely, the temporary deployment of a large number of additional officers following the 7/7 bombings in London was associated with a reduction in crime (Draca, Machin and Witt 2008). Given that such deployment patterns are short-term – and often related to other events – they provide limited evidence about the potential impact of smaller, marginal increases or decreases in police numbers.

References

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