The Police Ethnography Research Collaboration and the
International Criminological Research Unit

Being There: Ethnography and the Study of Policing

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University of Liverpool

James Hart PhD research:
'Squeezing The Thin Blue Line: Ethnographic Research into Police Partnership Working within Austerity'

Abstract

In the wake of the recent economic downturn, the reality of the fiscal crisis for public sector organisations has been to rethink roles and occupational mandates as the resources available to them diminish. The Police Service is no exception. Recent financial constraints on police expenditure have prompted forces to devise practical ways of reducing the cost of policing without compromising effectiveness and efficiency, particularly to front line services, and with reduced numbers of police officers. In addition, the expectation for partnership working has not diminished in this era of financial restraint.

This ethnographic PhD study with Cleveland Police force explores partnership working between the police and their partner agencies - predominately other public sector organisations - around the themes of local policing and the protection of vulnerable people, within an era of austerity. From this aim the study concentrates on two main areas. Firstly it examines how force policy and strategic thinking around partnership working has been influenced by austerity, before moving on to consider how partnership working translates from the strategic down to the operational level. Data has been generated from observing multi-agency meetings at strategic and operational levels, a police custody suite and a neighbourhood policing team. These observations have been supplemented with the analysis of a number of documents, as well as interviews and a focus group with officers and partners from within each of those research sites.

At this point findings suggest that austerity has strengthened the motivation of officers, at both the strategic and operational level, as well as other agencies to continue to work in partnership; producing some pragmatic and innovative arrangements. However, the lack of resources and the resulting focus on more immediate priorities has balanced some of the police's partnership arrangements in a position of precarity and in some areas has opened up gaps in service delivery. From this it can be argued that the police are being subjected to what I shall term 'hyper-efficiency' in this period of austerity; placing increasing emphasis upon efficiency in policing and undermining partnership working as a solution to austerity.