Policing the pandemic: highlighting the importance of community policing for wellbeing and health

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It is over a year since the dramatic events of 23rd March 2020, when the Prime Minister announced the country was going into a lockdown, with members of the public only be allowed to leave their homes for limited reasons; including, food shopping, to exercise once per day, medical need and travelling for work when absolutely necessary.

As we emerge from the national lockdown, with the accompanying realisation that these periodic episodes of social isolation may be are our 'new normal', we must remain mindful of the need to explore the public relationship with essential services such as the police. This can tell us much about how the North East adapts to social change and responds to the still changing socio-economic and political landscapes emerging in the wake of what is now three successive global pandemic waves. Just how did the police use of emergency powers to enforce social distancing measures and episodic national lockdowns, shape public perceptions of community relations, as well as the future role law and order plays in public health matters?

I feel now, as I did when we began this journey last year, that answering this question is my civic duty as a social scientist and professor of criminology at Teesside University. It was for this reason I offered, along with several of my colleagues from the School of Social Sciences, Humanities and Law, to conduct research for the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Cleveland and Cleveland Police. The Police and the OPCC had requested we undertaken an independent appraisal of how officers were balancing education and enforcement during what is now the first lockdown. The resulting work was undertaken over a three-month period against the background of a commitment by Cleveland Police to reduce the use by officers of fixed penalty notices and to better respond to the need for enhanced community engagement and support, with a view to promoting civic-focused models of crime control during the pandemic.

To ensure its robustness as tool for capturing public experiences and viewpoints during a time of heavily restricted social movement, the project used survey questions which the research team asked to residents across the region. These questions were chosen because they were also being used nationally at the time by YouGov polling and the Scottish Police Authority in its own review. Our approach enabled us to ensure we captured a robust picture of the region. Indeed, in August 2020 we published the first academic study of the policing of Covid19 in the United Kingdom. I am proud to say it also remains to this day the only study to independently compare a regional area with broader national trends across two countries – Scotland and England and Wales.

The findings obtained make for interesting reading. People in the region by and large followed national trends regarding their personal status, their response to the government lockdown, and their view of the police use of Covid19 emergency powers. For example, two-thirds (67%) reported they stayed at home most or all the time - 74% in the Scottish survey - and three-quarters (75%) reported that they tried to comply with all guidance provided to them – 80% in Scotland. Three-fifths of respondents (58%) reported that a concern for protecting the NHS drove their actions, rather than a concern with their personal protection (30%) or getting in trouble with Cleveland police (2%) – this NHS figure hovered around 61% in the comparative surveys. It seemed, therefore, that the people of Tees Valley were following national attitudinal trends.

Yet of most interest was the respondent view of police job performance, community presence and ability to respond quickly to events. People were mainly positive when asked if they thought the police were doing a good job, with 60% saying they felt this was indeed the case - 57% in the comparative surveys. However, they were nearly twice as likely as Scottish respondents to view the police presence in their local area as 'not enough' - 72% in Teesside compared to 38% in Scotland - and half as likely to say it was 'about right' - 22% in Teesside compared to 44% in Scotland. It was no surprise, therefore, to learn as these findings gradually emerged from the incoming data, that Teessiders were two and a half times as likely as those in other national surveys to report a lack of confidence in the ability of police to deal with incidents as they occur - 58% in Teesside compared to 22% in Scotland - and to do so quickly - 58% in Teesside compared to 22% in Scotland.

When taken all together, the findings pointed toward the conclusion that our respondents were communicating a highly informed and nuanced view of the relationship between police presence and broader operational capacity issues. Including, perhaps most importantly, the impact of the government austerity agenda on the ability of officers to respond in an agile manner to the immediate demands of a national lockdown.

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Indeed, as one anonymous member of the public commented:

"I think the biggest issue for the police is lack of staff, I have no doubt that they are doing the best they can with what they have, but at the end of the day it's just not enough, so you never really see them around here until it really kicks off." [Survey Respondent].

One of the reasons why this finding is so important is that the survey was collecting its data during a time when the 'Black Lives Matter' campaign had gathered pace. It was clear participants were concerned about the policing of the associated protest events during the lockdown. For example, when asked how much they agreed or disagreed with the advice in the UK that due to the coronavirus, mass gathering events should not take place, 75% strongly agreed and 14% agreed that they should not. The following comments encapsulate the general feeling amongst survey participants regarding such events:

"There is a time and a place for mass gatherings. Now is not it. Police put in a position of elevated risk. Protestors placing themselves in a position of elevated risk. Makes a mockery of those who have isolated and those who have cared for the sick during lockdown." [Survey Respondent].

"The local authority should not have granted permission for protests to take place. All protests should be illegal because they break the rules. Police should be empowered and required to break up all demonstrations." [Survey Respondent].

It was difficult with such comments and statistical data to not conclude that the people of the region prioritised public health concerns over nationally and globally much-discussed civil liberty matters. As a social scientist, for me this points to one of the key effects of the lockdown. We undoubtedly have over the last year become more and isolated from our long-standing social groupings, personal relationships, and in many cases, our work colleagues. The result of this has been that the larger social bonds which bind us to others, but which we perhaps had previously taken for granted, have become more important than ever before. The public servants who help us, such as NHS workers and our local community police officers, and who we perhaps see day to day more than we do family members and old friends, have increasingly over the last year become our 'social touchstones'.

But this search for new social connections does not solely happen because key workers like nurses, doctors, teachers, police officers and members of the fire brigade, provide us with essential public services whose need increases dramatically during this time. In a very real sense, our isolation has made us search for attachment in new places, and in doing so we can sometimes transpose strong personal emotions, which we often only bestow on family and close friends, onto more typically distance social relations and bonds. This is particularly most true of the caring public service roles, which we have grown up knowing we can instinctively trust: doctors, police officers, teachers, and so on. Indeed, such a view has lain at the core of criminological theory since Hirschi's seminal text *Causes of Delinquency*. (1969, Berkeley: University of California Press). Here Hirschi outlines how conformity and attachment are experienced in a very embodied way by individuals. Through his research, Hirschi highlighted how these abstract concepts are in fact very immediate physical sensations of 'presence' and 'absence', particularly when it comes to our sense of connection to people and events which are closest to us, and they therefore can and do shape much of our behaviour and many of our life choices.

Hence, the absence or shifting of our traditionally constant social bonds tends to push us to the edges of our social circles. In doing so, they lead us in new directions as we seek connections to restore our need for a positive 'social fix' during times of personal trauma and high social drama. Conversely, Hirschi notes, some people can turn inward, and perhaps in doing so exacerbate underlying wellbeing and mental health concerns. For still others, this situation can enable anti-social, delinquent and even criminal forms of behaviour to emerge. We do not, as Hirschi powerfully reminds us, all experience in the same way the absence or loss of our attachment to others.

In this sense, therefore, the emphasis on public health over personal liberty by Teesside survey respondents can be tentatively said to suggest the existence of positive social bonding during a time of extreme difficulty by people of a region well-known for both its hardships and ability to transcend them. A point previously touched upon by my colleagues Nick Gray and Dionne Lee on the [Governments levelling up agenda.](#)

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In short, the key finding of the survey was that people responded to the lockdown by conforming to social order as a consequence of the very human need to maintain social attachments which produce positive feelings of belonging for them personally. This suggestion certainly rings true when we consider that the close and loving relationships and ways of life we have all in one way or another lost in the last 12 months. But it is only one side of the story. The very presence of the Black Lives Matter campaign points to broader long-standing concerns with civil liberties, human rights and the continuing presence of socio-economic marginalisation, inter-personal discrimination, as well as institutionalised forms of racism and hate crime. Nonetheless, I would argue that it is important to focus on the policy and practice implications of these results. Particularly given that over the last several months since the project research findings were first published, interest has grown amongst the public and media in compliance and enforcement around lockdown restrictions (for example car park fines and weekend calls). It is clear that such media debates are underpinned by a concern for growing public movement away from conforming and positive social attachment. In doing so they point to what another eminent social scientist Arlie Hochschild referred to as the 'emotional labour' costs of public service work (1983 *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press).

If we consider that we have all been required to police ourselves during a period of a heighted fear of risk and over long periods of time, in many ways members of the public, much like members of caring professions and other service industries, run the real danger of 'compassion fatigue'. Indeed, my own research around the policing of Covid19 has moved toward exploring its associated emotional labour costs for the families of police officers, and in what ways this shares similarities and differences with the forms of social marginalisation and even acts of physical abuse, members of the public from vulnerable groups, report they have experienced during a year-long lockdown. This work is just beginning, and I look forward to reporting on its progress as it moves forward.

In conclusion, the policing of Covid19 project highlighted the need for officers undertaking community outreach to develop strategies which build on the initial positive social response and shift toward greater social conformity, which often occurs when large-scale public health threats and social order risks happen. But is also revealed that we must take care as time goes by to not overburden people and the demands on our emotional labour episodic lockdowns increasingly extract. Policing outreach is particularly important in this regard as it increases understanding between residents and officers; it develops trust; it helps officers better relate to diverse communities; and can have a significant and positive effect on crime reduction. Indeed, the publication of the policing covid19 report was welcomed by the OPCC and Chief Constable precisely because it pointed to this. If the last year has told us anything, it is that we need positive social relationships to ward off the threat of 'compassion fatigue' during these difficult times.

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