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The Nature of General Police Work

INTRODUCTION

“Police work” is often represented in the media and public discussion as being mainly about fighting crime, catching criminals and dealing with emergencies. Involvement in such activities is obviously an aspect of policing, but to what extent does the public image reflect the common, day-to-day work of police?

This research paper seeks to answer this and related questions through an analysis of the work performed by general duties police in Queensland. Aspects examined are:

- the amount of time which police on patrol spend on various activities
- the types of calls which are handled
- the pattern of demand for police services.

In presenting this description of police work, we aim to promote better public understanding of the police role in our community, and to assist policy makers to make informed decisions about police management and resource issues.

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DESCRIBING POLICE WORK

Scope of the Study

The focus of this paper is on the work done by uniformed general duties officers when on patrol or traffic duties. We are not concerned with the duties of uniformed staff in supervisory and managerial positions (that is Senior Sergeants and above), detectives or other specialists.

We have chosen to focus on general duties officers because they constitute the largest proportion of officers in the Queensland Police Service (QPS). As at 30 June 1995, about 89 per cent of sworn officers were below the rank of senior sergeant, while around two-thirds were assigned to general duties work.¹ Uniformed general duties officers are also the members of the QPS with whom the community has the most contact.

The Data

Although police work has been the focus of numerous studies, finding out what police do is still not an easy task (Bayley 1985). There is no single complete record of police activities and, until recently, police records were largely paper-based, making it very time-consuming to extract relevant information. Fortunately, increasing computerisation of police records should make it easier in the future to use information about police work for research, planning and managerial purposes.

The description of police work provided in this paper is largely based on three data sources:

- A Statewide Activity Survey conducted by the Corporate Planning Section of the QPS in May 1995. This survey involved officers at a sample of stations throughout the State recording information about the amount of time they spent on various activities over the course of one week.
- Patrol logs kept by two teams of general duties officers in the Toowoomba Division for a week in April 1994. These logs documented the major activities performed by officers during each shift.

- Calls for service data from Toowoomba² for February 1993 to January 1995 and for the West End Police Division in inner Brisbane from February to October 1995. Calls for service are requests for police assistance made by the public via the "000" emergency number or directly to a police station. This information is collected by the police primarily to manage the dispatch of patrol calls and officers to incidents.

We have used calls for service data because they provide a more comprehensive picture of police work than crime report data.³ The latter tell us only about incidents that result in criminal offence reports being lodged by officers. In contrast, calls for service provide information about the full range of demands for police assistance made by the public, and the types of incidents which general duties officers handle daily. Of course, some police tasks – such as patrols, random breath testing and so on – rarely generate a call for service record. Information about these types of activities must therefore be obtained from other sources, such as activity surveys and patrol logs.

Previous Studies

Until the late 1970s, descriptions of police work focused mainly on the time officers spent on crime or law enforcement activities (Lab1984). However, more recent research has looked at the full range of situations which the police handle and the actions that police take in dealing with these incidents.

These studies have shown that:

- Police do not respond only to reports of crime. They also assist emergency services, mediate family and neighbourhood disputes, direct traffic, deliver messages in time of serious family illness or death and give advice on a variety of policing and crime issues to the community (see for instance Bercal 1971; Wilson and Western 1992; Lilly 1978; Lab 1984).
- A relatively small proportion of police patrol time is spent on crime or law enforcement related tasks. Estimates have ranged from a low of 10 per cent (Walker 1983) to nearly half of police response calls (Sherman 1989; Greene and Klockars 1991).
- A small number of addresses and locations are responsible for a substantial proportion of all calls for police service (see CJC 1996a; Sherman 1989).

¹ This estimate is based on the QPS Statistical Review 1994-95 and information contained in *Implementation of Reform Within the Queensland Police Service* (CJC 1994, p. 92).

² Toowoomba is a provincial city with a population of 84,000, situated about 100 kms west from Brisbane.

³ See CJC *Utilising Calls for Service Data* (1996a) for a discussion of how police managers can better use calls for service data.

POLICE WORK IN QUEENSLAND

How Do Police Spend Their Time?

Figure 1 shows how uniformed police in Queensland spent their time during a typical week in 1995. The figure is based on data collected by the QPS from a sample of general duties and traffic police officers (below the rank of Senior Sergeant) throughout the State. Officers participating in the survey were asked to indicate the amount of time spent on particular tasks. The estimated time spent dealing with incidents and policing problems included all activities that were undertaken by officers to resolve or finalise a matter.

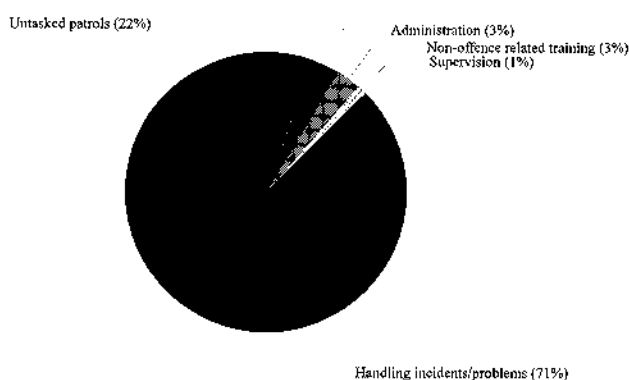


FIGURE 1: AVERAGE TIME SPENT ON POLICING ACTIVITIES DURING ONE WEEK, QUEENSLAND (1995)

Source: QPS Statewide Activity Survey 1995.

Notes:

1. Figure shows the time spent by traffic and general duties officers below the rank of senior sergeant. Meal breaks were excluded from the calculations.
2. The estimates of the proportion of time spent on handling incidents and policing problems includes all activities (such as responding to calls, investigating, paperwork, training, patrols and presenting evidence in court) that were undertaken by the officer concerned in completing or finalising the task.
3. Unweighted percentages are presented in this figure.

According to Figure 1, on a statewide basis, 71 per cent of officers' time was taken up with handling incidents, responding to reports of offences and other related activities. Most of the remaining time (22%) was devoted to "untasked" or nonspecific patrolling.

The survey results show that only three per cent of officers' time was spent on administration. However, this was because the paperwork associated with specific incidents and crimes was recorded as time spent handling the incident. A more accurate indication of the amount of time taken up by

paperwork is provided by our analysis of Toowoomba patrol logs (below). The low proportion of time spent on supervision (1%) reflects the fact that only officers below the rank of Senior Sergeant were included in the survey.

Figure 2 presents the average time spent in one week on various activities by two teams of Toowoomba general duties officers working the same shifts. The figure indicates that responding to calls for service and suspicious incidents was the most frequently performed police duty. This activity accounted for around 14 hours, or 35 per cent of total shift time for the week. Other significant activities were general patrolling and administration (around 7.5 hours each, or 19 per cent of total shift time for each type of activity) and traffic (5.5 hours). Very little time was devoted to investigative work or follow-up calls.

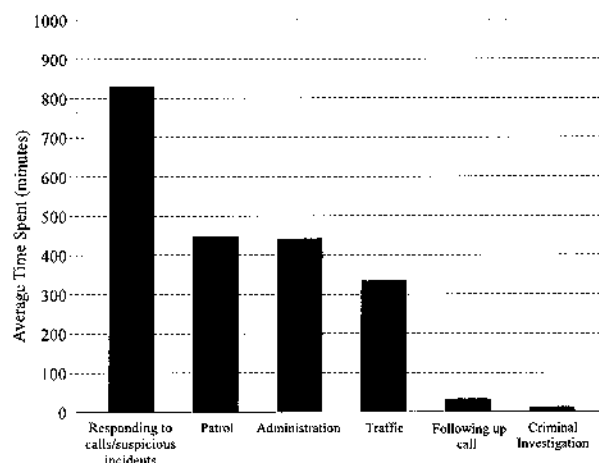


FIGURE 2: AVERAGE TIME SPENT ON MAIN TASKS IN ONE WEEK AS RECORDED BY GENERAL DUTIES OFFICERS, TOOWOOMBA (1994)

Source: Toowoomba general duties officer patrol logs (11/4/94-15/4/94).

Notes:

1. Figure shows main activities and does not include meal breaks, attending training and other miscellaneous tasks.
2. These times are approximate only; times were not always indicated for some tasks performed by the officers.

Types of Calls Handled by Police

As discussed above, the largest block of police time is spent responding to calls for service and handling incidents. In this section of the paper, we detail the types of matters which prompt people to contact the police.

Figure 3, which is derived from Toowoomba calls for service data for February 1993 to January 1995, illustrates the diversity of requests made by the public for police assistance.

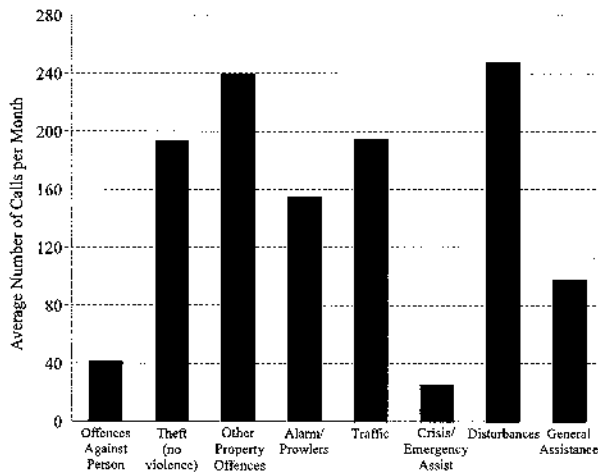


FIGURE 3: AVERAGE MONTHLY CALLS BY TYPE, TOOWOOMBA (FEBRUARY 1993 – JANUARY 1995)

Source: Toowoomba calls for service data.

Notes:

1. There was a change in recording practices in July 1994 with the adoption of a computerised dispatching system (IMS).
2. Calls that could not be matched to an address or location in Toowoomba were not included in the figures.
3. The classification of types of calls was made by police based on information provided by the caller.

Key points to note are:

- The single largest category of calls related to “disturbances”, such as unruly or rowdy behaviour, neighbourhood disputes, offensive language and complaints of loud or excessive noise. Many of these matters involved “public order” problems, rather than criminal offences.
- A substantial number of calls related to traffic matters and provision of general assistance to the community (such as delivery of messages about death, assisting people who have collapsed and lost/found property). Few, if any, of these calls could be considered to be crime-related.
- An average of 155 calls per month concerned alarms or reports of prowlers, of which around 95 calls were triggered by building security alarms. A study by the QPS of alarm calls in the Brisbane metropolitan area in 1992 found that 68 per cent of such calls were consequently confirmed as false alarms. The QPS has conservatively estimated that the cost of attending each false alarm is around \$75 (unpublished data provided by QPS).

- Only around 46 calls per month – or one call for every two patrol shifts⁴ – concerned possible offences against the person such as robbery or assault. There were even fewer calls of a crisis or emergency nature – an average of just over one for every four shifts.

The Toowoomba data lend support to other studies which have found that the majority of police patrol work does not entail dealing with “crime”. As shown by Figure 4, a criminal offence report was completed for around one-third of the calls responded to by the Toowoomba police. However, it must be acknowledged that many other calls required police to play some kind of enforcement role, for example, dealing with disturbances and noise complaints; and attending traffic accidents.

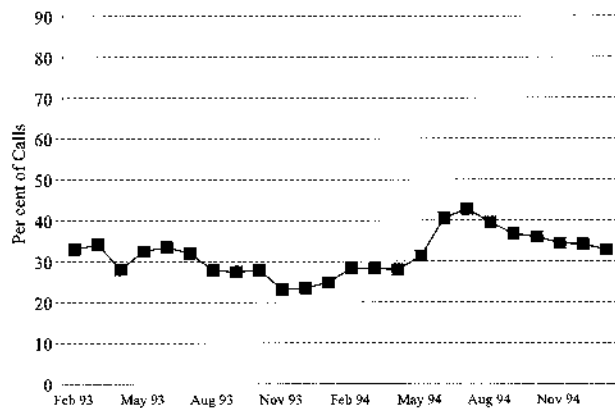


FIGURE 4: PROPORTION OF CALLS RECORDED AS RESULTING IN A CRIMINAL OFFENCE REPORT, TOOWOOMBA (FEBRUARY 1993 – JANUARY 1995)

Source: Toowoomba calls for service data.

Note: In some instances, criminal offence numbers may not have been recorded, as officers were required to go back to locate the previous record. This may particularly have been a problem prior to July 1994, when the data were collected manually on jobcards.

Obviously, not every Police Division will have the same call for service profile as Toowoomba. However, it is noteworthy that West End Division, in inner Brisbane, showed a broadly similar pattern for the nine-month period ending in November 1995. Property offences (26%) and disturbances (21%) constituted nearly half of all calls for service in the Division. This was followed by traffic related matters (13%) and theft where no violence was used (12%). Offences committed against the person and responding to alarms/reports of prowlers each accounted for about five per cent of all calls.

Concentration of Calls for Service

Most police know of locations that produce numerous calls for police assistance. However, what is surprising for most officers, and for others interested in policing issues, is the extent to which police time is taken up by repeat visits to a relatively small number of addresses and locations.

Table 1 presents data on the frequency with which police were called to attend different Toowoomba street addresses. Non-matched addresses were excluded from this analysis, so this may well underestimate the extent of repeat calls.

TABLE 1: DISTRIBUTION OF ADDRESSES BY NUMBER OF CALLS, TOOWOOMBA (MAY 1993 – JANUARY 1995)

Addresses	May- July 93 %	Nov 93- Jan 94 %	May- July 94 %	Nov 94- Jan 95 %
With 1 call	77	79	81	80
With 2 to 5 calls	21	18	16	18
With 6 to 10 calls	2	2	1	1
With more than 10 calls	1	1	1	1
Number of addresses attended by police	2,492	2,565	2,461	2,652

Source: Toowoomba calls for service data.

Note: Addresses with insufficient information were excluded. Calls from the police station were included.

The table shows that most addresses attended by police generated only one call in each three-month period, but around three per cent of the addresses requiring police service were attended six or more times in that period. In each three-month period around one per cent of addresses – or 20 to 25 locations – were attended more than 10 times. These one per cent of addresses accounted for around 18 per cent of all calls in each period.

Some addresses remain active for long periods. For example, in Toowoomba six of the “top ten” incident addresses in February – April 1993 were still on the list a year later (Table 2). These addresses included hospitals and a bus terminal, commercial premises, intersections and residential locations such as blocks of flats or boarding houses. At some locations the predominant problem was traffic related; some had a long history of disturbances and offences against the person; and others, such as the hospitals and the bus terminal, were characterised by a mix of calls.

TABLE 2: TOP 10 REPEAT ADDRESSES, TOOWOOMBA (FEBRUARY – APRIL 1993 AND FEBRUARY – APRIL 1994)

February–April 1993		February–April 1994	
Location	No. of calls	Location	No. of calls
1. Hospital A	84	1. Hospital A	87
2. A Ave & J St	43	2. A Ave & J St	56
3. M St & V St	32	3. R St & S St	40
4. 6 O St	29	4. R St & So St	33
5. 554 R St	24	5. M St & V St	26
6. 277 M St	19	6. J St & S St	21
7. Hospital B	18	7. 28 N St	19
8. J St & R St	18	8. B St & W St	19
9. R St & S St	18	9. Hospital B	18
10. 28 N St	17	10. B St & R St	17

Source: Toowoomba calls for service data.

Another source of information about repeat calls is our evaluation of the West End Beat Policing Pilot Project (CJC 1996b). Analysis of calls for service data for the beat area showed that over the nine months of the pilot project, the 12 busiest addresses accounted for 191 calls for police assistance, representing 19 per cent of the total calls for service workload during that period.⁵ By way of illustration, one address, a boarding house, generated 27 calls in this nine month period, mostly relating to minor offences and general disturbances. Another address was responsible for 12 false alarm calls in the space of six months.

Both the Toowoomba and West End data show how a small number of addresses can demand a large amount of police time and attention. The data also indicate that addresses may be busy for a variety of different reasons.

CONCLUSIONS

There is still a tendency – both within and outside of police organisations – to see the “real business” of policing as responding to and investigating crime. However, the data presented in this paper show that dealing with crime is only one aspect of police work. As we have seen, much of the time of general duties police is taken up with responding to disturbances (often of a low level nature), attending accidents and enforcing traffic laws, responding to alarm calls and providing general assistance to the public. These matters rarely generate a crime report.

⁵ These data were taken from the QPS Computer Aided Despatch (CAD) system. Due to insufficient detail, a substantial number of calls were excluded from the repeat addresses analysis. It is therefore likely that the actual number of repeat calls has been understated.

The observation that much police work is not about crime has important implications for the training of the police and the assessment of police performance. Specifically:

- It is important that police are trained to carry out the full range of functions which they are required to perform, rather than the emphasis just being on crime and law enforcement. For example, the high number of disturbance calls attended by police highlights the value of police receiving proper training in conflict management.
- The test of whether someone is a good police officer should not simply be how many crime reports that officer completes, or the number of arrests which he or she makes. Skill in handling conflictual situations and in dealing with members of the public should also be regarded as important measures of effectiveness, and of a person's suitability as a police officer.
- In assessing the performance of police organisations, the focus should not be only on traditional measures such as crime trends and clearance rates. A broad array of measures should be used, for example: successful implementation of problem solving initiatives, trends in repeat calls for service, road safety indicators, and service user satisfaction.

The information contained in this paper and other studies of police work is also relevant to the issue of how police resources can be used most effectively. Significant points include:

- A substantial proportion of police time in Queensland is currently spent on untasked patrols. However, American research shows that increasing or decreasing the level of random patrolling in an

area does not have any discernible effect on the crime rate, or on public perceptions of safety (Kelling et al., 1974).

- Very little of the work done by general duties police could be described as proactive or preventive in focus.
- It is uncommon for general duties police in Queensland to undertake criminal investigations.
- A considerable amount of police time is taken up with repeatedly returning to a small number of problem addresses and hot spots, and with responding to false alarm calls.
- According to the Toowoomba patrol logs, close to 20 per cent of total shift time worked by general duties officers is spent on administration.
- Many of the matters which police are required to deal with, such as neighbourhood disputes, ongoing family conflicts, and various public order problems (for example, drunks in the street) cannot be effectively resolved by the police alone.

In highlighting these findings, it is not our intention to suggest that it is easy – or even desirable – in all instances – to change the way in which police currently operate. For example, a large administration load may be unavoidable, given the need for police to be accountable, prepare material for court, and so on. Similarly, there may be substantial practical and organisational obstacles to moving from a reactive to a more proactive policing style, and to breaking down the traditional barriers between general duties police and detectives. However, the information presented in this paper ought to be taken into account in any future consideration of police management and resource issues.

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