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Volunteering within the Police: Summary

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Key Findings

1. Volunteers bring a range of skills that are useful for the police. Many want to use these skills; however, some want to explore volunteering opportunities that are new to them. A skills analysis of new volunteers will be highly useful, but some will want to do something completely different.
2. Motivations for volunteering vary, from wanting to join the Regulars through to just wanting to do something worthwhile. Managers need to be aware of these differences.
3. Most volunteers enjoy their time with the police and get a lot out of it; yet some feel underused or under-informed, a concern for volunteer retention.
4. Volunteers are generally complementary about their supervision and have good relations with other volunteers and with Regular officers.
5. Special Constables and PSVs see their role as being in support of Regular officers. Whilst this supporting role is important, so too are their roles in improving legitimacy, providing a 'bridge' between the regulars and communities, and in making the police more representative of communities.
6. PSVs generally see their role as quite different to the Regulars, and so when asked about PSVs potentially being given powers, most are against the idea.

Background

There has long been volunteer involvement in British policing, most notably since the introduction of the Special Constabulary in 1831. Specials have the same powers as regular officers, but are usually unpaid. From the early 1990s across England and Wales, volunteers started to appear in many other areas of police work, including supplementary voluntary patrols and staffing of police station front counters. Those who volunteered were officially badged as 'Police Support Volunteers' (henceforth PSVs). The Home Office actively promoted PSVs from the early 2000s onwards. More recently, there has been a governmental drive to promote community participation in what the Conservatives called a 'Big Society'. This promotion of local solutions came with calls to improve police-community relations, and coincided with budget cuts to the police. The result was a climate where the active recruitment of unpaid police volunteers became more appealing. Often perceived as a free resource, there are cost implications of taking on more volunteers. In Lancashire - the force where the current study occurred - all PSV duties are required to have union approval as *additional* to existing paid roles before being advertised.

Volunteering is an under-researched aspect of modern policing. The lack of research poses a range of issues for the police's understanding of volunteers, and of making the most of volunteers' contributions. The focus for this study was those who volunteer for Lancashire Constabulary as either Special Constables

or PSVs. The main difference between Specials and PSVs is that PSVs are unwarranted and usually non-uniformed.

Aims of this study

The aims of the study were to investigate:

- The factors that inhibit or facilitate the participation of volunteers within the police;
- Wide ranging matters related to the recruitment, management and supervision of volunteers within the police; and
- Factors which might inhibit or reinforce the operation of and outcomes associated with volunteering within the policing context.

Methods

The project adopted a form of Participatory Action Research (PAR) which involved the researcher and participants working together, with police volunteers actively involved in the co-production of knowledge. Twenty-five semi-structured interviews with police volunteers took place between February and April 2016, including 9 Special Constables and 16 PSVs. Six of the interviews were conducted by the project lead, while the remaining 19 were conducted by four police volunteers who received training in interview technique, analysis and research ethics. Analysis was conducted by the project lead informed by a further meeting with three volunteer interviewers to discuss the interview process and initial findings. The project adhered to the British Society of Criminology code of ethics and received ethical approval from Edge Hill University.

Who becomes a police volunteer?

In July 2016 Lancashire Constabulary had 502 Special Constables contributing on average 21.6 hours each that month. For the same month there were 313 PSVs across the Constabulary, who volunteered an average of 2.8 hours each. There were also 350 Police Cadets. More detailed data were available for the PSVs, whose age, gender and ethnic breakdown were not too dissimilar to the 2011 Census figures for Lancashire. There were slightly more females than males and perhaps slight under representation of Pakistani and Indian volunteers, but there were more than expected Chinese volunteers.

The 25 interviewees were an opportunistic sample and they were therefore not necessarily reflective of all volunteers. That said, the PSVs interviewed were an older group than the Specials, which perhaps reflected both volunteering opportunities for PSVs and the profile of Specials, with a proportion joining in order to gain experience before applying to become a regular.

Volunteers' skills and experience

The 25 volunteers interviewed had a range of volunteering experience with the police, from just three months though to a remarkable 44 years. There is a wealth of experience among some of these volunteers that should not be underestimated. For some of the interviewees making best use of volunteers' skills was an issue, with one PSV suggesting that better skills analysis was needed. That said, they generally enjoyed applying the skills that they have to a policing setting.

"I'm looking for challenges; I'm looking for work that complements my skills" (PSV3).

However, some volunteers enjoyed doing something that was completely different to their day job. According to PSV4, *"it's actually nice to use a completely different skillset"*. For PSV1, she was *"looking for something different than perhaps I'd done before"*. Whilst volunteers would be interested in a more concerted skills mapping when they initially volunteered, it should be appreciated that some want to do something different to what they have done before, and that they may have particular motivations for this.

Police volunteers' values

Whilst it is useful to know about the skills the volunteers bring with them to the police, it is also helpful to know more about the kind of people that choose to volunteer. A popular theme was the 'golden rule', or as PSV12 put it, "*I treat people, hopefully, as they would treat me*". It is a philosophy for living that can also have an impact on the policing workplace. For instance, if the police want to be respected, then they must show respect to others. The theme of respect was picked up by the volunteers, alongside integrity and honesty. According to one Special:

"you should treat everybody with the respect that they deserve" (Special18).

The volunteers also highlighted the importance of family, character, being non-judgemental, trying to help each other, doing the right thing, decency, kindness, giving people a voice, supporting others, accepting people and giving something back.

Why volunteer for the police?

Many young applicants volunteer for the Specials for instrumental reasons in that they see it as a way of getting into the regular police. For instance, according to Special20: "*What motivates me is I want to be a regular, I want to join the police service.*" At the other end of the age spectrum some who volunteer post-retirement have quite different motivations, often centred on finding something useful to do. For one Chinese volunteer who helped with a foreign language phone line it was an opportunity to help the Chinese community. For another PSV it was an opportunity to do something worthwhile.

The experience of being a police volunteer

The Police Specials interviewed ranged from a newly recruited Special Constable through to a Chief Inspector. As for the PSVs, their roles were diverse, with many taking on more than one role. The roles adopted by the 16 PSVs interviewed included Police Complaints; Cadet leadership; Community Road Watch; administration; Early Action Support; restorative justice; foreign language hotline; crime trend analysis; research; Independent Custody Visitor; and Independent Panel membership. Use of the Force website for volunteer recruitment was praised.

What is it like being a police volunteer?

The majority of PSVs and Specials found becoming a volunteer fairly straightforward. Most found it an enjoyable experience; as Special9 commented, "*I really enjoy it, it's volunteer work like nothing else.*" While there were some issues, it was a broadly positive picture. The interviewees enjoyed volunteering because it made them feel useful, or they enjoyed being part of a team. One volunteer enjoyed the flexibility and a Cadet leader enjoyed seeing the Cadets make improvements. According to PSV3

"I get a lot of satisfaction from it, inasmuch as I feel very much appreciated; I'm challenged in what I do."

What would volunteers change?

There are a few areas for improvement that, if not addressed, could impact on the volunteer experience and may cause some to leave. While most were satisfied, a few volunteers felt underused, as PSV23 put it, "*it's a bit intermittent*". Giving volunteers enough to do is vital for maintaining enthusiasm; as is keeping them informed. A PSV working with police complaints commented that: "*the main thing we've found is that we're not kept up to date with events relating to these complainants*" (PSV1). Another frustration for one PSV was the speed of expenses claims. The concerns of the Police Specials were different. Most were pleased with their experience; however a strong focus on taking on recruits as a training ground for the Regulars was questioned.

Volunteers' views on their supervision

Volunteers were generally complementary about their supervision, although a minority commented on a lack of contact. Most were happy that they knew who to contact for assistance and that police employees in general were willing to assist.

Relations with other volunteers and with regulars

When volunteers work with others in the police they generally have good relations. For instance, according to PSV10, regular officers, "*will always be thankful and appreciative of the work we do*". The Specials included in the study also had generally good relations with regular officers. As for relations with other volunteers these were also good. For PSV4 "*we get on great because we're all, like I say, we're all likeminded*".

The roles of volunteers and regulars

All volunteers were asked what they considered to be the roles of the police, and more specifically the roles of the police volunteer. The roles of the police are varied, comprising traditional crime fighting and order maintenance, plus a social service function, with the police needing to be there to help those in need and to reassure the public. Many volunteers were aware of these different aspects to policing. Some focused on the need to "*keep law and order*" (PSV16) or "*to keep the peace, mainly*" (Special14); some mentioned work on cybercrime and terrorism. Many volunteers – perhaps due to their experience of being a police volunteer – were also very much aware of the wider social service functions of the police, including safeguarding, work on sexual exploitation, mental health issues, and domestic abuse. As for the volunteers' role within policing, while some of the Specials saw their role as the same as regulars, most of the Specials and PSVs saw their role as being supportive of the regulars.

"...to help save police time, to enable them to do their role" (PSV1);

"...to assist the Regulars, to serve the people" (Special7).

This supporting role is clearly important, yet it is possible that the volunteer is of equal importance. Volunteering has been promoted within the police in order to improve legitimacy, to provide a 'bridge' between the regulars and communities, and for the police as an organisation to be more representative of communities; as one Pakistani British volunteer noted, he volunteered in order to "*break down barriers*" (PSV21). A further PSV observed how she works with, and not for the police:

"If I work for you, you're employing me, and I'm stuck with you. As a volunteer, I work with you, and if I don't like what I get, I'll walk away" (PSV3).

It is important to acknowledge the partnership relationship with volunteers.

Police volunteers and powers

As noted, Special Constables have the same powers as regular officers. PSVs do not have any powers; however, in September 2015 the government consulted on the introduction of powers for some PSVs. Some of the interviewees were in favour of the introduction of powers. However, the majority were less favourable and saw the role of the PSV as something quite different to the warranted officer; as noted by PSV2, "*I'd rather see more specials than volunteers [PSVs] taking on that role*". According to PSV5, "*I don't like that idea ... some power just belongs to policemen*".