

Crime and local accountability

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Is neighbourhood-level monitoring of neighbourhood policing counter-productive?

The concept of neighbourhood policing, where policing is focussed towards the local priorities of the community and the police are more accountable to citizens, has cross-party support.

WHAT IS NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICING?

Neighbourhood Policing Teams (NPTs) have been set up to concentrate on policing small geographic areas. These tend to be a single ward in urban areas and a group of wards in more rural areas.

NPTs are usually led by police officers and include police community support officers

ACCOUNTABILITY AND DIRECT ELECTION

Could direct election improve police accountability? Currently, police authorities are made up of local councillors and independent members, but the public knows little about them. Labour consulted on direct election of police authority members in 2008, but decided against this on cost grounds, and to avoid politicisation. Liberal Democrats favour direct election of most police authority members. Conservatives propose replacing police authorities with directly elected commissioners.

- Are police authorities too invisible to provide adequate accountability?
- Would direct elections make the police more responsive, or distort their priorities?
- Would enough people vote?
- If turnout were low, could extremists hijack elections?

(PCSOs). They often work with local authority wardens, volunteers and other partners.

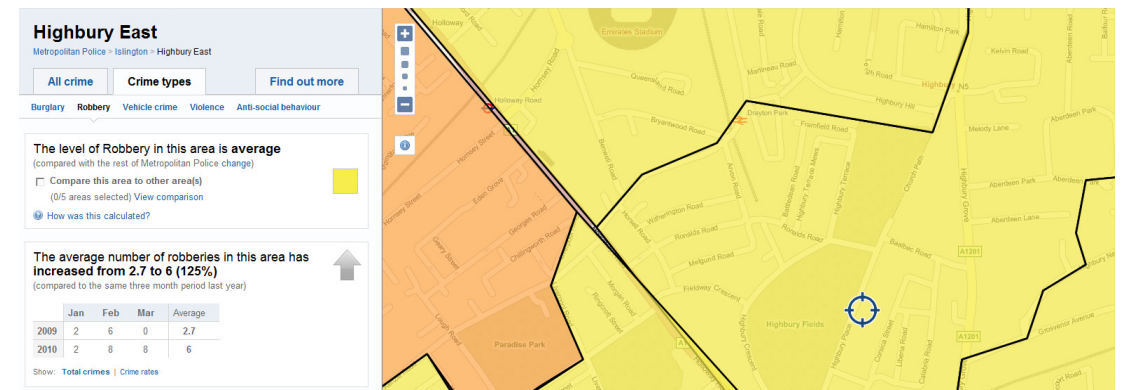
In order for the local community to be able to hold the police to account, they need access to local crime data at as local a level as possible. The Casey Review of crime and communities suggested that 58% of the public want information about what is being done to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour in their area. In a well-functioning system, such information should make the police more accountable to the local community and thus more responsive to their needs, in turn increasing public confidence in their local police.

The Crime Mapper website provides data relating to crime and anti-social behaviour for a selected area and allows for comparisons of monthly data for up to five areas. Information is available by Police Force, Basic Command Unit (BCU), Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP) and NPT.

PROBLEMS WITH MEASURING CRIME AT VERY LOCAL LEVEL

Making local level crime statistics easily accessible to the public is not without potential problems:

- **Small numbers of crimes:** Within a single NPT area there are likely to be low numbers of offences in a given month or quarter. There is a danger that inappropriate conclusions regarding crime rates will be drawn from changes in these very small numbers, which may actually be attributable to statistical variation. Such problems can be magnified when changes are put in percentage terms. In the example shown,



a change from 2.7 robberies to 6 is a 125% increase but the same change in the opposite direction is a 55% fall.

- **Re-classified data:** The information provided on the website is provisional and subject to change as offences are re-classified following investigation. How will citizens react if, due to re-classifications, a previous rise in crime is revised to show a fall in offences? Will they accept that this is a pitfall to be expected when using administrative data or could NPTs be accused of manipulating the data?
- **Media bias:** The media are more interested in rises in crime than in falls, so headlines will tend disproportionately to report crime increases. With relatively small numbers of offences recorded, there will usually be the opportunity to report on large proportionate increases in certain crimes in certain areas.
- **Limited data available:** Each neighbourhood has different policing priorities, yet the information provided by Crime Mapper only provides data for total recorded crime plus the centrally selected

offences of burglary, robbery, violence, vehicle crime and anti-social behaviour. What use is this tool to local residents if what they perceive to be their policing priority is not covered by the centrally selected offences? For example, there may have been a spate of criminal damage offences relating to vehicles within the neighbourhood. A local resident would not be able to use the tool to see if surrounding areas were also being similarly affected and how this had changed over time.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES?

Will the police divert resources towards those offences affecting the participative middle classes at the expense of other groups within the community who take a less active role? Is this a tool that will be used by the middle classes to steer clear of areas with high crime rates, leading to the creation of ghettos in these areas? Will local accountability result in police priorities being skewed towards tackling crimes that have, rightly or otherwise, been perceived to have increased?