

Austerity Policing's Imperative:

Understanding the Drivers of Policing Activity in Canada

In August 2015, newspapers in the United Kingdom (UK) were reporting – in various tones of outrage – on a pilot study that would have ordinarily been of little interest to anyone but police and a few criminologists. The purpose of the pilot (‘the East Midlands Special Operations Unit (EMSOU) trial’) was simple: to evaluate the investigative utility of dispatching Scene of Crime Officers (SOCOs¹) to attempted burglary sites. The stated rationale for the pilot was also simple: years of shrinking police budgets in the UK had necessitated a re-examination of policing programs and practices to ensure their efficiency and effectiveness. To that end, the EMSOU and the Leicestershire Police agreed to run a randomized control trial in which SOCOs would only be dispatched to attempted burglaries at houses with even numbers. Attempted burglaries at odd numbered houses would be attended by police only. Exceptions were to be made for crime scenes where a vulnerable victim was present or there were reasons to believe that the attempted burglary was part of a pattern. What the EMSOU results demonstrated was something not unknown to crime scene officers: their attendance at burglary scenes, in this case *attempted* burglary sites, often does not produce forensic evidence leading to suspect identification (author 1, 2010).

The takeaway message from this study should have been that the automatic deployment of SOCOs to attempted burglaries should be reconsidered in light of labour costs (Leicestershire Police, 2015). However, daily newspapers generated a very different message:

“Police failed to fully investigate home invasions for three months ‘if house had odd number’”

– Withnall (2015)

¹ Also known as Forensic Identification officers or Crime Scene Investigators.

‘Leicestershire police ‘ignore’ attempted burglaries at odd-numbered houses’

– BBC News (2015)

The result was a small media firestorm. Critics of the trial cast it as ‘denying 50 per cent of victims a basic service, based on something as arbitrary as their house number’, suggesting that such cuts were “ethically dubious at best” (Withnall, 2015). The ever-threatening spectre of decreased public confidence in the police was raised by several quarters (Ward, 2015). Further, much of the resulting commentary in online forums suggested the public did not take exception to budget cuts, *per se*, but rather to the possibility that cuts might affect them. In response to the need to reduce policing costs, solutions proffered by the public were often sarcastic and unhelpful.

We begin this paper with a discussion of the EMSOU Trial because both the study and the response it generated highlight two key facts not unique to policing in the UK. First, continuing economic pressures post-2008 mean many, if not most, police agencies are grappling with budget cuts. Second, these cuts come at a time when demand for services remain high and the possibility of reduced, staggered or cut services can trigger panics over real or imagined loss of police legitimacy. In essence then, police are left trying to satisfy what appear to be two contradictory sets of demands: cut costs but do not cut public services.

When it comes to the issue of how best to rationalize police service costs, part of the problem is that police activities have grown so vast in size and scope that they present something of a conceptual muddle for would-be cost cutters or, alternatively, ‘demand managers’ (Wiggett, 2015). Within the Canadian context, we have seen evidence for this in a series of reports by researchers, think tanks and police organizations, who have variously looked at costs in terms of

identifying a set of largely undifferentiated ‘drivers’ (Ahlgren 2015; Leuprecht 2014; Malm, Pollard, Brantingham, Tinsely, Plecas, Brantingham, Cohen and Kinney, 2005). The result is a hodge-podge of recommendations for how to improve efficiencies and reduce costs that may realize some savings, but fail to tackle larger issues

In this paper, we attempt to shed some conceptual clarity by mapping a range of workload and other demands that fall within two general domains of policing activity, termed here ‘operational’ and ‘administrative’ drivers. Improved understanding of these drivers, we believe will shed needed light on how police organizations can best tackle what appears to be an intractable problem.

Operational drivers of policing costs

Operational drivers describe the workload that results from the actual delivery of the police organizations’ core mandate. For our purposes, these drivers are divided into four sub-categories: service delivery, investigative procedures, response capability and organizational policy decisions.

Service delivery – the burden presented by calls for service - has typically been the focus of police workload analysis. Of course, such a focus lends itself to direct observation as calls for service and crime rates can be easily counted. The causal factors for those calls for service can then inform analysis as to what drives police workload. This approach has led to some relevant observations, notably the increased burden on police to serve as *de-facto* mental health workers, which results in hours of labour costs associated with, among other tasks, waiting at hospitals to have individuals admitted (Ahlgren, 2015). Although much of the focus in Canada has centred on such service costs within large municipal or regional services, costs associated with policing in rural, remote and/or northern communities are significantly higher than average due to three

factors: economies of scale due to smaller staffing levels, higher staffing costs (remote pay as incentive) and high transport and travel costs associated with moving goods and people in and out of remote areas (Ruddell and Jones, 2014).

Focusing solely on service delivery however results in a one-dimensional, and probably over-simplified, analysis. Indeed, such a focus fails to provide satisfying answers to concerns that police budgets are increasing while crime is decreasing (Kari, 2014). A more robust analysis of operational burdens suggests that we also consider the impact of investigative procedures – that is, the processes that the police engage in when actually investigating crime – which have consistently grown over the last few decades as a result of technological advances. Perhaps the most notable (relatively) new investigative technology is DNA analysis, which was first used in Canada in 1989 (RCMP, 2014). Collecting and analyzing DNA required an entirely new set of investigative procedures; it also led to increased public expectations that forensic investigators would be employing such techniques at many, if not most, crime scenes (author 1). In this regard, we can see that technology supplements, but does not necessary supplant, existing evidence gathering techniques, while creating increased workload. Other examples include analysis of technical data from cellphone records, from which police can determine the location of the phone by identifying the cell tower location that handled the call. By conducting analysis of computer hard drives, the police trace the downloading and storage of child pornography. GPS trackers can be installed on vehicles in order to supplement surveillance efforts. These technological processes result in new types of evidence that simply did not exist before, and collecting that new evidence takes additional time and resources.

Of course, the intersection between service delivery demands, labour, and other costs associated with changes in investigative procedures is readily understood (see CCA, 2014). A

less visible addition to the list of operational burdens police face comes from ever-evolving expectations for the police to have the capability to meet a changing landscape of public safety, regardless of how often the police are actually called to provide that capability. For example, prior to the Columbine High School shootings in 1999, there was no such thing as ‘Active Shooter’ or ‘Active Threat’ response, yet by 2014 the expectation that police agencies possess such a response capability was so well developed that the RCMP was severely criticized for failing to provide its officers with that training and therefore being unprepared for an attack by an “active shooter” that resulted in the deaths of three RCMP officers. Similarly, the adoption of patrol carbines is a relatively new phenomenon, but one that is now accepted as a required use of force option (MacNeil, 2015). Yet both the active shooter and patrol carbine programs require initial and ongoing training that is in addition to other mandatory police training.

The increased response capability expected of police includes, ‘added training requirements related to increased accountability and liability issues respecting such matters as use of force, emergency vehicle operation, handling of domestic violence cases, harassment prevention, labor code changes, and emergency preparedness’ (Malm et al., 2005: 5). Moreover, additional training in crisis intervention and de-escalation is also a growing expectation (Iacobucci, 2014). In response, police agencies have implemented various *Crisis Intervention and De-escalation Courses* (Procurier, 2014).

Organizational and/or government policy decisions can also drive increased service expectations and requirements. This is perhaps most visible in domestic violence response. Against current expectations, merely separating the parties with no view of preventing future threats to the victim would amount to dereliction of duty. Robust responses to domestic violence, however, come at substantial costs. One major Canadian metropolitan service estimated they

spent \$4.2 million in wage costs in one year alone to deal with 4,585 domestic disturbance or domestic violence calls, which resulted in criminal charges in just over 25% of cases (Ahlgren, 2015). At the municipal level, small changes in public policy can create a greater workload on police services, as was recently evidenced in Edmonton when local council increased late night transit services and thus the need for increased hours for the policing of those services prompting workload complaints from the local police association (Mertz 2014). Perhaps the single biggest driver of police costs in this area, though, has been as a result of budget cuts to other public sectors, resulting in what Leuprecht (2015: 13) terms a “downloading of services.” As he explains, “Police must deal with the fallout of provincial and municipal governments looking to balance their budgets by reducing social services, incarcerations, and the number of people in institutional care”(ibid.).

Administrative drivers of policing costs

Whereas much of the operational work conducted by police is visible to the public, and directly related to their expectations of what a police service should provide them, there are another set of drivers that are almost entirely invisible to the general public: administrative drivers. These drivers include the back-end tasks, activities and processes that police engage in to meet their core objectives, as well as demands for public accountability and external access to police information. We have categorized these drivers as internal (demands generated within an organization based on its perceived organizational needs) and external (demands generated by external sources in order to meet perceived needs of the public or other institutions).

Internal

As is the case with any organization, in order to meet internal operation needs that, in turn, satisfy external operational demands, police agencies require employees to engage in a

number of tasks and processes that will, in theory, allow them to more efficiently and effectively meet their mandates. How these tasks are intended to engender efficiencies, as an example, is through accurate, current information used to allocate resources wisely and control workload.

In interviews two of the authors conducted for a recent study (authors 2015), a frequent complaint heard by police members was the amount of time spent in the office completing paperwork in order to satisfy internal supervisory controls on workload quality and volume. Paperwork associated with case files is used to control internal workflow and monitor officer and unit performance. Examples of workflow monitoring include supervisors ensuring that officers under their command close non-significant files in a timely manner, that officers and supervisors are managing workload and not producing bottlenecks and to ensure that files are handed off to other units as required. With the creation of modern RMS (record management systems), in most jurisdictions much of this work is computerized and routinized. However, it still consumes time and energy at both individual and organizational levels. Further, what RMS systems do not lessen is the requirement by some organizations for police members to open files on all calls regardless of the nature of the call or its subsequent disposition. In police parlance, such activities constitute ‘CYA²’ and add to workload (authors 1 and 3, 2015).

Case files do, however, allow police to track unit performance as a means of producing statistics that can be used to justify internal budgets and staff numbers. To illustrate, if arrest and charge rates within the Drug Section are consistently down, a supervisor might find unit members reallocated to another unit with ‘higher numbers.’ In light of external pressures regarding budgets and issues of police legitimacy, perhaps a more key use of police paperwork

² Covering Your Ass.

as a performance measure is the use of case-based statistics by police organizations to justify budgets, staff sizes and performance within the community.

Although much of the focus here has been on the administrative work associated with case files and their uses, there are other whole areas of police administration that also generate workload demands. These include forms and processes associated with staffing actions, such as promotions and applications to specialized sections, as well as recruitment, training and workforce retention. Regular staff supervision activities must also be taken into account, including monitoring sick days, keeping personnel files and administering performance reviews. All of these processes consume organizational resources, none of which are typically seen by those outside the organization.

External

Of externally imposed burdens on the police, the most commonly cited are those generated by the courts. Whether one is referencing routine paperwork associated with case construction and processing (issuing a summons to appear), or new or continuing demands created as a result of legal decisions by the courts (such as the requirement in Canada that police obtain search warrants for computer IP addresses), administrative tasks linked to processing cases through the criminal justice system are generally seen as a significant cause of police workload issues (Ahlgren, 2015). Perhaps the most commonly cited of these are police hours spent in court attendance and frequently voiced complaints about trial delays and court inefficiencies generating higher police labour costs (Leuprecht, 2014). However, administrative demands by Crown prosecutorial services in relation to case processing and disclosure requirements also produce costs. To illustrate, we note that two of the authors work in a jurisdiction in which police officers spend a significant amount of time photocopying and

printing materials for disclosure because local prosecutors refuse to accept digitized forms (even on compact discs). In some jurisdictions, the burden of transcribing witness statements falls upon police; in others, police attend bail hearings and, in some instances, act for the Crown (Ahlgren, 2015).

Another driver of external administrative costs comes in the form of demands for knowledge production and sharing by outside agencies. Of these, perhaps the most well documented are demands by insurance companies for information on motor vehicle accidents and crimes related to property (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997). Insurers are not, however, the only external agencies that generate such demands. Among consumers of police information are other public institutions, which use police information in order to meet their own internal needs and public mandates (LeBeuf and Pare 2003). Many of these inter-institutionalized demands do not operate on a cost-recovery basis and thus police absorb additional costs of satisfying the knowledge needs of other organizations. For example, it is fairly standard for provinces to share information regarding motor vehicle collisions with not only insurers but also with provincial highway traffic bureaus. In one province, every collision involving over \$2000 in damages necessitates officers filling out a form providing detailed information regarding road, weather and vehicle conditions, including evaluations of car tires.

Demands for increased public accountability, particularly in the wake of high profile events, have resulted in legislative changes requiring police to comply with investigations by internal and external oversight bodies. These accountability measures, in turn, create reporting requirements on various types of incident (Ahlgren, 2015). Documents must not only be created by individual officers, but read, processed through command chains, acted upon (if necessary), shared with other relevant agencies, and stored. As accountability mechanisms increase, so too

do the costs associated with knowledge production and oversight. Under the umbrella of ‘public accountability’ we might also lump costs associated with ever-increasing demands for information made by media outlets and citizens. Police organizations are called upon to supply information, updates and commentary on a wide array of stories. Much of the ‘front end’ of this work is handled by media relations staff, who produce news releases, social media blurbs, conduct press conferences; however, media staff rely on operational police officers for that information, which is a further set of labour costs. Police also frequently bear costs associated with demands for information made under provincial or federal freedom of information requests. While some of the costs of these requests can be recoverable – that is, if they produce a significant volume of paper – costs from lower volume requests are typically absorbed by the police agency.

Conclusions

Following the economic crisis of 2008, governments in Canada, the U.K. and elsewhere have repeatedly identified policing costs as a public policy concern. Controlling policing costs through cost cutting measures – which is often held out by policy-makers as the most viable solution – can, and does, however, place police organizations in direct conflict with public demands for sustaining high levels of policing services. Evidence of such conflicts, and the problems they bring police leaders who may be struggling to retain public confidence, is easily exemplified by the uproar over the EMSOU Trial, as well as by public reactions to a host of other actual or proposed front-end service cuts.

In extrapolating some of the activities that make up the ‘operational’ and ‘administrative’ drivers of policing, our objective in this paper is not to prepare a conclusive report on all activities included under the heading ‘policing costs’. Instead, going above and beyond simple

calculations and standard ways of conceiving costs – such as linking labour costs to crime rates or police numbers to *per capita* population sizes – we attempt to highlight the multitude of activities police agencies are responsible for in their daily practices. We do so as a means of demonstrating there are a host of potential cost cutting and cost recovery measures that could be implemented, most of which do not affect visible operations. Indeed, the merit in identifying specific operational and administrative drivers, as we have begun to do here, is that such exercises provide opportunities to explore ways in which cuts can be effected without changes to front-end service levels. In effect, we are arguing for scrutiny of the day-to-day activities that dominate police efforts, yet remain largely invisible to the public – that is, the ‘administrative’ drivers of policing costs. Simple solutions may include having clerical staff, instead of fully salaried police members, completing, organizing and photocopying paperwork, transcribing and ‘fiddling’ with images for court processing or performing data entry tasks. Further, we argue for closer attention to demands imposed on police from external agencies —insurers, transportation ministries, social services, the courts and so on— which result in tasks that are particularly time consuming and costly for police services. Implementing cost recovery measures for such activities is one relatively straight forward solution that would help check some of the hidden costs of policing. Another is to make determined efforts to work with other institutions, notably the courts, to rationalize administrative activities and reduce waste. These are only a few such solutions. Undoubtedly, further investigation into the administrative drivers of policing costs will yield many more potential areas for increasing efficiencies and thus lowering costs.

To be clear: we do not wish to suggest to readers that police budget cuts can be achieved solely through focusing on the less visible aspects of police operations. The reality is that what can and will be cut, in many instances, is largely dependent on factors external to a given agency.

As an example, services may have little to no input into decisions made by policy-makers with respect to whether specific programs are cut, funding for new members is approved, or over whether visible operations can be protected in the face of what might be staggering reductions in public funding. That said, we believe it is imperative that in order to continue maintaining frontline policing services – and thus continuing public support for policing – what is required are broader discussions of what police services can and should be doing. For those discussions to be fruitful, we need an improved understanding of what drives policing costs in the first place.

What the economic future will hold in the short term remains unclear. What is evident, though, is that while we remain in a period of economic recession, police services will have to contend with growing demands to do more with less. How they do this, while keeping front-end services largely intact, will entail a significant degree of creativity and ingenuity. It will also, as we have argued here, entail a thorough understanding of the costs associated with both operational and administrative drivers.

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