Improving Engagement: Building Trust in Policing with Young People

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The relationship between young people and the police has been found to be tense, with police officers' attitudes and behaviour towards young people found to reduce the latter's willingness contact the police when they have been the victim or witness of a crime.[1] The PSNI's Policy Directive 13/06[2] seeks to outline the manner in which the police can attend to the needs of young people more effectively and increase their confidence in policing. The Policy acknowledges that youth culture is often misunderstood and that, as a result, the PSNI need to engage with young people[3] in an open minded manner.

It therefore seeks to foster greater engagement between police officers and young people in order to build positive relationships and encourage young people to play an active part in society. By facilitating constructive dialogue it hopes to help prevent and reduce the likelihood of young people being subjected to crime and enable them to avoid participating in crime and disorder. This the PSNI aims to do by dealing promptly, effectively and fairly with young people in a consistent manner. All of the aims and objectives set out in the Policy are set within a human rights framework, integral to which is Article 2 on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child that stipulates that the rights of young people should be upheld free of all forms of discrimination regardless of socio-demographic factors.

This paper presents selected findings from a survey conducted by the Institute for Conflict Research and Public Achievement during September 2009 and February 2010.[4] The findings have been chosen due to their capacity to highlight the opinions and perceptions that young people currently hold of the PSNI, which offer the possibility to gauge the degree to which the PSNI are meeting the requirements outlined in their Policy Directive 13/06 and suggest possible areas for improvement.

Previous research

Research exploring the relationship between the police and young people in Northern Ireland has shown that each hold negative perceptions of the other.[5] While little has been written about the police officer's perceptions of young people it has been noted that "officers fail to understand the needs of young people and stereotype their clothing and behaviour"[6]. Byrne and Monaghan (2008) meanwhile found that, due to the amount of time spent dealing with call outs relating to youths causing annoyance, there is a view among PSNI officers that young people are little more than a major source of anti-social behaviour. Such insights suggest that police officers have a lack of understanding regarding young people's needs and have a tendency to stereotype them.

Research on young people's perceptions of the police almost universally stresses that young people hold overtly negative views of, and have little confidence in, the police. Key in this regard is the common sentiment shared among young people that the police do not understand the problems they face[7] and constantly target them[8]. Young people have been found to be less likely to say police are polite, helpful or fair and are less willing to report an incident than older members of society.[9] Meanwhile, a high proportion of young people have been found to blame the police for a degree of the disorder that occurs in their community[10], are unwilling to go to them if they have a problem[11] and have little interest in joining the police service[12].

It has also been suggested that socio-demographic factors also impact specific sub-sections of the young people's interactions with the police. Community background has been found to be a significant factor shaping perceptions and attitudes of the police[13], with a view among both of Northern Ireland's main communities that the other community is treated better by the police[14]. Meanwhile, being male increases one's risk of being involved in crime[15] and young men have higher levels of contact with the police than young females[16]. Young men's interactions with police officers are also more likely to be hostile in nature[17], leading them to experience higher levels of 'improper treatment' from police officers than females[18].

The research therefore suggests that young people's perception of the police is negative, suspicious and even hostile with a common sentiment being that they are misunderstood, targeted and picked on. Such findings suggest that the PSNI are not treating young people fairly. Community background and gender has also been found to shape young people's interaction with police officers, raising questions as to whether all young people are treated in

a consistent manner by the PSNI. Both points question the degree to which the PSNI are meeting the aims and objectives outlined in their Policy Directive 13/06, especially whether or not they are upholding the human rights framework in which the policy is set. Through analysis of recently collected survey data, which reveals young people's experiences with the police, the degree to which the PSNI are meeting the requirements set out by Policy Directive 13/06 will be discussed.

Research Methodology

The questionnaire that was conducted by ICR and Public Achievement[19] was adapted from a survey conducted by Hamilton et al. (2003)[20] and was designed to elicit young people's experiences of interacting with police officers. It was disseminated at workshops and interviews as well as being made available online through the Public Achievement website.

In total 212 young people completed the questionnaire of which 61% were young men and 39% young women. Respondents came from across Northern Ireland and were predominately aged between 13-15 (37%) and 16-18 (37%). Two thirds (63%) of the sample were currently at school, 10% were at college, 8% were working, 7% were unemployed, and 7% were currently studying at university. The large majority of participants (94%) identified themselves as being from a white ethnic background. Ninety-two percent claimed affiliation with Northern Ireland's two main communities: 47% of who considered themselves to be from the Protestant community; while 45% stated that they were Catholic. Meanwhile, participants predominately self-identified as one of three main national identities, with 39% stating that they were Irish, 32% claiming a Northern Irish identity and 23% classifying themselves as British.[21]

The data collected offers an indication of the extent to which the PSNI engage with young people and treat them fairly and consistently without discrimination. The findings are also comparable to those of Hamilton et al. (2003), offering an insight into the degree to which PSNI's Policy Directive 13/06 has affected how the PSNI deal with young people.

Young People's Perceptions of the Police

Of the 212 young people who completed the questionnaire 70% stated that they have had some form of interaction with the police. Such interactions could be classified into three broadly defined forms of contact: adversarial

contact, co-operative contact and social/educational contact.[22] The most common form of interactions were adversarial in nature, with 33% of young people reported having was being told to move on and 29% stating that they had been stopped and searched. Such forms of contact were higher in incidence than the number of participants that had social/education contact, with 27% reporting having had took part in a police engagement programme and just 7% taking part in a police sponsored activity. In relation to co-operative forms of contact, young people were more likely to interact with the police as a victim of crime (28%) than they were as a witness (18%).

The types of contact experienced were connected to the location of the interaction with the more young people reporting interacting with police in a confrontational setting, on the street (65%), compared to potentially more neutral settings such as an individual's home (19%), at school/college/work (12%) and in a youth centre (10%). The most commonly reported form of police behaviour experienced by respondents was 'disrespectful' (38%), this was followed by other forms of negative types of behaviour including being 'wrongly accused of misbehaviour' (31%), being 'stopped without reason' (29%), and hearing police officers 'swear' (23%). However, the second most common form of behaviour experienced *overall* was positive in nature, as 32% of respondents reported that the police were 'polite,' this was closely followed by 'fairness' (30%) and 'professionalism' (28%).

These findings suggest that the majority of young people are interacting with police officers in a potentially confrontational setting, 'on the street,' which has led many young people to experience adversarial forms of contact with the police and experience inappropriate police behaviour. This is reinforced by the fact that fewer respondents reported interacting with police in neutral settings, such as a school or youth centre, and as a result respondents were less likely to state experiencing positive police behaviour.

Cross-tabulating the results revealed that young people who experienced adversarial forms of contact were more likely to experience disrespectful police behaviour and state that they heard police swear than individuals who had co-operative or social/educational forms of contact with the police. Conversely, young people who engaged with police in neutral settings were more likely to state appropriate police behaviour than those who had not. Similarly, young people who reported having had contact with the police on the street were more likely to report experiencing disrespectful police behaviour and less likely to say police behaved in a professional, fair or polite manner than those who interacted with them at school, college, work or at a youth club.

Interacting with police in confrontational settings and experiencing inappropriate police behaviour appears to have had an effect on the way respondents felt while interacting with the police. Significant levels of young people stated that they feel always or sometimes 'angry' (73%), 'threatened' (42%), and/or 'harassed' (39%) during their interactions with police officers. Not only this but large numbers of respondents reported never feeling 'respected' (40%), 'understood' (40%), 'safe' (28%) nor 'listened to' (26%) by the police. This meant that young people were more likely to disagree or strongly disagree, rather than agree or strongly agree, that the 'police understand youth issues' (51% compared to 27%) and that the 'police treat young people fairly' (54% compared to 27%). This strongly suggests that many young people feel ill at ease whilst in the presence of police officers and that there is a strong sentiment among them that the police neither fully understand them nor treat them fairly.

These findings therefore raise questions about the degree to which the PSNI are meeting the objectives set out in their Policy Directive 13/06 as it is evident that young people, who completed the questionnaire, do not feel that the police treat them fairly or listen to them. Such negative perceptions may therefore hinder the police's ability to help prevent and reduce the likelihood of young people being subjected to crime or help them to avoid participating in crime and disorder. The negative relationship between some young people and the police may be connected to the modes of contact and the location of the interaction, as it was found that both shape police behaviour towards young people, with adversarial interactions and those in potentially hostile settings found to increase the chance of young people experiencing inappropriate police behaviour. This would indicate that the police are not treating all young people the same, with some officers discriminating against some young people due to the mode and location of the interaction, contrary to Article 2 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This latter point is exemplified in the experiences of young people from different community backgrounds.

Community Background

Of the 70% of young persons who had contact with the police 53% were from a Protestant community background while 38% identified as Catholics. The most prominent forms of interaction differed between members of each community background, with Protestants more likely than Catholics to report contact with the police after having committed a crime (29% compared to 11%) but also having engaged with the police through a youth club or school

(33% compared to 17%). Catholics, on the other hand, were more likely to be in contact with the police than Protestants after witnessing a crime (26% compared to 14%) and also when being told to move on by the police (39% compared to 33%). Both Catholic and Protestant respondents reported having similar levels of interaction with the police in all locations except youth centres, in which 20% of Protestant respondents compared to 9% of Catholics reported having had contact with the police.

There were interesting differences between the forms of behaviour that Catholic and Protestant respondents had experienced. Catholic respondents were slightly more likely than Protestants to report 'disrespectful' behaviour (43% compared to 37%) and being 'stopped without reason' (32% compared to 28%). Protestants, on the other hand, were more likely than Catholics to report being 'harassed' (17% compared to 9%), being 'wrongly accused of misbehaviour' (35% compared to 29%), experiencing 'violent' behaviour (19% compared to 11%), and hearing the police 'swear' (29% compared to 6%). Surprisingly, while Protestants were more likely to report negative forms of behaviour, they were also more likely to report experiencing inappropriate police behaviour than Catholics, including 'professionalism' (27% compared to 20%), 'fairness' (33% compared to 21%) and 'politeness' (33% compared to 25%). This may be due to the higher levels of social/educational contact Protestant respondents stated having with police in youth centres.

Differences in experiences, due to one's community background, extended beyond modes of behaviour and location of contact to the feelings respondents reported experiencing during their interactions with police officers. More Catholic than Protestant respondents stated that they never felt 'protected' (32% compared to 26%) or 'respected' (58% compared to 43%) when in contact with the police. On the other hand, Protestants were more likely than Catholics to report always feeling 'confident' (38% compared to 24%), 'listened to' (26% compared to 9%), 'proud' (22% compared to 11%), 'safe' (27% compared to 18%) and 'understood' (21% compared to 10%) when interacting with the police.

Community background thus appears to have an impact on both the nature of interaction and the types of behaviour that young people are likely to experience when interacting with the police. While *both* Catholics and Protestants reported experiencing adversarial forms of contact with the police, Protestants were more likely to report positive police behaviour. This finding may be linked to the fact that Protestant respondents were more likely than Catholics to report having social/educational contact with police in neutral settings. This may in turn also in part account for the greater levels of positive

feelings Protestant respondents reported experiencing while interacting with the police. However, it is also important to keep in mind cultural differences and the fact that traditionally Protestant communities have had higher levels of support for the police in Northern Ireland than Catholics, which may be a contributing factor in the attitudes of respondents.

It is important to note that there is no evidence to suggest that the police intentionally treated people from a Catholic background any differently from those from a Protestant one. Rather it is suggested that respondents from a Protestant background were, on average, more likely to interact with the police in more neutral settings, such as youth centres, which has therefore allowed them to experience more positive forms of contact with the police. This is in line with the point made above that the location and mode of contact a young person has with the police will shape the behaviour they are likely to expect. Similarly, gender was also found to shape young people's interactions with the police.

Gender

Seventy-eight percent of male respondents reported having had some form of contact with the police, whereas only 58% of female respondents had been in contact with the police at some point in their lives. Male respondents were more likely than female respondents to report contact in the form of being the perpetrator of a crime (28% compared to 5%) and being told to 'move on' (35% compared to 30%). Female respondents on the other hand where more likely than male respondents to report contact after being the victim of a crime (34% compared to 25%) and being the witness of a crime (25% compared to 16%). Male respondents were thus not only more likely to be in contact with the police than females, but their interactions were also more likely to be adversarial in nature. This is reflected in the locations in which they had been in contact with the police. Males were more likely than females to have contact with the police on the street (69% compared to 54%), whereas females were more likely than males to have contact with the police at school, college or work (24% compared to 14%).

Forty-two percent of males reported experiencing disrespectful police behaviour compared to 30% of females, males also more commonly stated experiencing being 'stopped without reason' (31% compared to 24%), violent police behaviour (16% compared to 9%), 'harassment' (16% compared to 7%) and having an item of their property taken by the police (13% compared to 9%) than female respondents. Meanwhile, female respondents were more

likely than males to report that the police had been polite (41% compared to 29%) and professional (37% compared to 25%), although males were slightly more likely than females to say that the police had behaved fairly (30% compared to 28%).

Male respondents were more likely than female respondents to report experiencing negative feelings in their interactions with the police. Female respondents stated more frequently than male that they always felt 'protected' (28% compared to 18%) and 'understood' (22% compared to 15%) in their interactions with the police. They were also more likely than male respondents to report never feeling 'harassed' by police (68% compared to 59%), while also stating less frequently than males that they never felt 'safe' (18% compared to 33%) when interacting with the police.

These findings suggest that male survey respondents, on average, are more likely to interact with the police in potentially confrontational locations and experience more adversarial forms of contact with the police than female participants. This suggests that one's gender impacts on the interactions a young person is likely to have with the police. Female respondents, who experienced higher levels of engagement and more acceptable forms of behaviour while interacting with the police, were also more likely to state feeling positive in such interactions. These findings strongly indicate that due to the form and location of police contact young males have they are more likely to experience inappropriate police behaviour. This will damage young males' perceptions of the police and perhaps lead police officers to negatively stereotype young men. This would suggest that programmes designed to prevent young people from becoming victims and/or perpetrators of crime should be designed appropriately to meet the needs of each gender group.

2003 Comparison

Comparing the current survey results with those of a similar survey conducted by Hamilton et al. (2003)[23], in which nearly half of respondents (45%), aged 24 or under, had some form of contact with the police, reveals the most common forms of contact between young people and the police have changed little since 2003. The two most frequently reported forms of contact reported by survey respondents in 2003 were being stopped and questioned (22%) and being asked to move on (20%), with such interactions being regarded by some respondents as a form of harassment (2003: 40). These are the same two most frequent forms of behaviour reported by respondents of the 2010 survey, although in 2010 they were reported by a higher percentage of

respondents suggesting young people today are more likely to have contact with police that is potentially viewed as harassment.

Respondents of the 2010 survey also reported higher levels of co-operative interactions with the police than 2003 respondents due to being the victim of a crime (28% compared to 18%) and witnessing a crime (18% compared to 11%). This suggests that police young people's willingness to co-operate with the police. However, respondents to the 2010 survey, when compared with 2003 respondents, were also more likely to be in contact with the police due to having committed a crime (21% compared to 13%). This perhaps indicates that the police are targeting young perpetrators of crime more effectively today than in 2003.

Survey respondents in 2003 reported similar trends in the location of their contact with the police. Sixty-four percent of the young people said contact had taken place on the street, 18% stated that it had taken place in their home while 6% had said it had taken place in school, college or work.[24] While the levels of reported contact on the street and at young people's homes are similar in the 2003 and 2010 surveys, there has been a positive increase in the number of respondents who have reported contact with the police at school, college or at work (6% to 12%). This suggests police have increased their level of social/educational contact with young people over the last seven years.

In 2003 58% of survey respondents reported 'disrespectful' or 'impolite' behaviour; 41% experienced the police 'swearing;' 38% were 'wrongly accused of misbehaviour;' 31% were stopped without reason; 29% were harassed; 21% said police did not follow proper procedures; 16% stated the police did not carry out their duty properly; 15% said the police used sectarian, racist or sexist language; 12% stated the police took an item of property; 6% felt discriminated against due to their race or gender; and 4% had their house searched without reason.[25] All these forms of inappropriate police behaviour were reported less frequently in 2010 than in 2003, apart from having one's home searched without reason, indicating the police have improved how they interact with young people since 2003.

Similar trends were noted in 2003 as in 2010 regarding the relationship between community background and the form of behaviour likely to be experienced when interacting with the police. As in 2010, respondents to the 2003 survey with a Catholic background were more likely than those within the Protestant community to report disrespectful behaviour. Similarly, in 2003 Protestants felt that they were more likely to be harassed and wrongly accused of misbehaviour than Catholics, as in 2010 (Hamilton et al. 2003: 43).[26]

There were also parallels between the 2003 and 2010 surveys in the manner in which gender shapes interactions with the police. Similar to the 2010 survey, male respondents in 2003 were more likely than female respondents to be in contact with the police as a perpetrator of a crime (17% compared to 6%). While the level of female respondents perpetrating crimes has slightly dropped between 2003 and 2010 (6% to 5%), the level of male respondents reporting being in contact with the police as a perpetrator of a crime increased sharply (17% to 28%) (Hamilton et al. 2003: 41).[27] This may indicate that the police are increasingly targeting, or becoming more successful at targeting, young males who perpetrate crime. In 2003, male respondents were also more likely than female respondents to report experiencing violent police behaviour (31% compared to 26%). However, both males (16% compared to 31%) and females (9% compared to 26%) reported violent behaviour less frequently in 2010 than in 2003, revealing a positive change in police behaviour.

Overall, comparing the results from these two surveys, conducted seven years apart, suggests that young people today are more likely to be in contact with the police than in 2003 through interactions that may be perceived as 'harassment.' Despite this, survey respondents in 2010 reported experiencing fewer forms of unacceptable behaviour today than in 2003. This may be due to the finding that the police are engaging with young people through schools, colleges and workplaces more today than in 2003, which may in turn account for the increasing confidence in young people to report a crime and come forward as a witness to the police. However, community background and gender were still found to actively shape the location and form of contact a young person has with the police, particularly if they are a male.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to assess young people's experiences of interacting with the PSNI in an attempt to gauge the degree to which the PSNI are meeting the aims and objectives outlined in their Policy Directive 13/06. It has found that there are still a large number of young people who report experiencing inappropriate and unacceptable forms of police behaviour, suggesting that not all young people are treated fairly by the police. The types of behaviour experienced were linked to the location and form of contact that young people have with police. Hostile settings, such as the street, and adversarial interactions, including 'being told to move on,' were likely to negatively shape young people's interactions with police officers. Conversely,

engagement in a neutral setting was found to promote positive police behaviour. Community background and gender were also found to be important factors that influence the mode of contact a young person is likely to experience while in contact with the police. Young males were found to be particularly at risk of experiencing inappropriate police behaviour due to the fact they more commonly are in contact with police on the street and as perpetrators of crime, suggesting that some young people may face discrimination at the hands of the police due to their socio-demography. However, comparing findings from the 2010 survey with those of a 2003 survey reveals that since the inception of Policy Directive 13/06 the police have improved their levels of engagement with and behaviour towards young people.

The PSNI's Policy Directive 13/06[28] outlines the manner in which police officers should attend to the needs of young people. By fairly and consistently engaging with young people the PSNI hope to facilitate constructive dialogue that reduces the likelihood of young people being subjected to and/or perpetrating crime. However, some respondents reported experiencing unacceptable and inappropriate behaviour that will serve to limit the ability of the PSNI to meet such aims and objectives. Not only this but police officers may be stereotyping young people in light of the form and location of contact they have with them as police behaviour was found to be in part shaped by socio-demographics. Such stereotyping may lead some officers to, intentionally or not, discriminate against some young people, especially young males, contrary to Article 2 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The PSNI therefore must seek to continue to increase and improve the forms of engagement they have with young people. It is pertinent that the PSNI actively seek to foster interactions in neutral settings between police officers and young people who are at risk of becoming alienated from the criminal justice system, especially perpetrators of crime and young males. By doing so they will encourage such young people to play an active part in society and help to reduce the likelihood of such young people being subjected to or perpetrating crime in the future.

Notes

1   Hanson, 2004; Byrne et al., 2005; Roche, 2005.

2   PSNI, 2004.

3   'Young people' is used throughout this paper to discuss human beings
    aged under 18 and up to the age of 24.

4   See Nelson et al., 2010. This project was funded by the Irish Department
    of Foreign Affairs and the final report is available upon request from
    Public Achievement (http:/www.publicachievement.com/).

5   McVeigh, 1994.

6   PSNI et al., 2004.

7   Byrne et al., 2005; Central Survey Unit, 2002; Hamilton et al., 2003;
    Roche, 2005.

8   Hansson, 2005.

9   CSU, 2002.

10 Byrne et al., 2005; Hansson, 2005.

11 Hansson, 2004.

12 Byrne et al., 2005; Roche, 2005.

13 Byrne and Monaghan, 2008; Mulcahy, 2006; Weitzer, 1995.

14 ESRC and ARK, 2001.

15 Wood, 2005; Lloyd, 2009.

16 Roche, 2005.

17 Ellison, 2001.

18 Roche, 2005.

19 See Nelson et al., 2010.

20 This questionnaire itself was designed in conjunction with both the
    Police Ombudsman's Office and the Policing Board and used modified
    questions from surveys previously administered by the Police
    Ombudsman.

21 Two respondents stated that they also saw themselves as Northern Irish
    as well as their primary national identity; both were classified
    themselves as British.

22 These three forms of contact are defined in relation to respondents'
    questionnaire answers. Adversarial contact refers to: being told to move
    on, being stopped and questioned, committing a crime and being asked
    to produce driving documents. Co-operative contact refers to: being a
    victim of crime or witnessing a crime. Social/educational contact refers
    to: engagement with police and taking part in police sponsored
    activities.

23 The survey was completed by 1,160 people who ranged in age from
    those under 16 to those aged up to 24.

24 Hamilton et al., 2003: 41.

25 Hamilton et al., 2003: 43.

26 Hamilton et al., 2003: 43.

27 Hamilton et al., 2003: 41.

28 PSNI, 2007.

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