The Dynamics of Police Legitimacy Among Young People

RESEARCH SUMMARY - OCTOBER 2014

BACKGROUND: YOUTH POLICE RELATIONS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Whilst general confidence in how the police serve wider society in Northern Ireland is reasonably high amongst young people on average, there continue to be many problematic issues in how young people and the police perceive each other and interact with each other. Some of these issues may be related to Northern Ireland’s specific experience with conflict, but the majority of these problems seem to be more related to challenges that arise from a conflict of ways of life and values between young people and society, with the police acting as representative and authorities of adult society. More specifically the mistrust of young people that is evident in adult society filters through to how the police interact with them. Police spend much of their time stopping and questioning young people or dispersing their gatherings in response to call outs and complaints by adult residents. These problematic interactions add to a mutual distrust and strained relationships between police who face disrespect carrying out duties that they see as low priority and young people, particularly young working class males, who feel they are being unfairly targeted.

Our study set out to examine the causal dynamics underpinning young people’s relationships with, and views of, the police. In particular, we sought to examine the antecedents of legitimacy and willingness to cooperate with the police, and explored these dynamics in terms of perceptions of police fairness and effectiveness, and identification with wider society.

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

A longitudinal survey was carried out in two waves: the first between March and May 2013, and the second from September 2013 and February 2014. We sought to recruit a diverse sample of 14 and 15-year-olds across a number of demographic characteristics. In the main this was well accomplished at time 1 (N=830), with a good diversity of types of school, across a range of geographical areas in Northern Ireland. Attrition at time 2 (N=319) was uneven, with boys in particular less likely to be included in the matched sample. This means that we effectively have two samples that are useful for two different purposes. The time 1 sample is similar enough to the population to be reasonably useful for descriptive purposes, while the matched sample is a large enough longitudinal sample for us to investigate causal dynamics.

GENERAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE POLICE AND KNOWLEDGE OF POLICE OMBUDSMAN, NIPB AND PCSPS

General evaluations of the police tended to be positive on average, but it is clear that negative perceptions are held by a substantial minority. However, it is crucial to point out that this minority was not defined by traditional sectarian divides. Indeed, we found no evidence for reliable or systematic differences between young people from Protestant versus Catholic backgrounds. While other survey
evidence suggests there may be a more substantial difference for adults, this is not the case for the age group included here. Variation in this general ‘job rating’ of the police was closely related to how fair the police were perceived to be, in line with the so-called procedural justice perspective on police legitimacy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither disagree nor agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Police do a good job as a whole</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The police can do whatever they like</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
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Most of the respondents had rather limited knowledge of the Police Ombudsman, Policing Board and PCSPs. The majority had not heard of any of these. Only a minority were aware of the independence between the NIPB, Police Ombudsman on the one hand and the police service on the other. Most did not know about the roles of either.

![Knowledge of the Police Ombudsman and Policing Board (percentages)](chart)

Knowledge of the Police Ombudsman and Policing Board (percentages)

It is noteworthy that around one quarter of the sample saw the police as unaccountable, given that Northern Ireland has perhaps one of the most comprehensive systems of police oversight and accountability in the world. Our respondents’ awareness of the Police Ombudsman and Policing Board was modest to say the least. We suggest, then, that the accountability of the police needs to be better communicated. This is not only a matter of young people knowing how to contact the Ombudsman should they need to, though of course that is important. It is also a matter of citizenship, such that the relationship between the police and the public is properly understood by all. Having an enjoyable encounter with a police officer on a school visit might be of some benefit. It may be more important, however, that young people learn that the police are accountable to the public rather than a force unto themselves. This could happen in the context of a school visit, so long as that visit emphasises accountability rather than trappings of authority that set the police apart from the general public. It could also happen in the context of citizenship education.
INTERACTIONS WITH POLICE OFFICERS

As with the general perceptions of the police and of police legitimacy, our respondents reported more positive than negative encounters with police. However, negative experiences were reported as well. In particular, feelings of anger and perceptions of police officers being unfair and assuming our respondents to be ‘up to no good’ stand out as the most common negative experiences. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this was especially common among those who have been in trouble or moved on. From these data, we cannot know what the police actually said or did to provoke this assessment. What is clear, though, is that our respondents distinguished this aspect of the encounter from other aspects that we asked about. In other words, they were not condemning police conduct in a blanket fashion. Rather, the particular question about being assumed to be up to no good appears to have resonated with them. Moreover, some of these experiences, and the types of interactions in which they were most common, were systematically related to gender and economic background: boys, those entitled to free school meals and those living in urban areas reported the most negative encounters.

Perceptions of police behaviour reported by respondents with experiences of different types of encounter with police officers (percentages describing police as having done this at least ‘quite a bit’).

CAUSAL DYNAMICS OF POLICE LEGITIMACY

In conducting this study, we aimed not just to describe attitudes and experience, but also to assess the causal dynamics of police legitimacy. Our causal model, tested using the matched longitudinal survey, points to the central role of identification with society: that is, the sense of commitment, pride and importance that young people feel in relation to their belonging to wider society. Across time, identification with wider society emerged as the most important antecedent of both police legitimacy and the perception that they serve people like oneself, which in turn predicted participants’ self-reported likelihood of cooperating with the police and avoiding crime and antisocial behaviour. Thus, those who lacked such a sense of investment were more likely to see the police as oppositional to their interests, to lack a sense of obligation to them, and hence more likely to say they would engage in crime and antisocial behaviour. The model strongly supports a relational account of compliance with the law (whereby the police are seen to be ‘on the same team’, embodying the norms of a wider social order) rather than an instrumental one (whereby people comply in order to avoid punishment). Crucially, individuals lacking such identification were not limited to a particular demographic. Across
the range of social and economic backgrounds represented in our study, there are those who feel strongly identified with wider society and those who do not.

Conceptual diagram showing the sequence indicated by the structural equation model

**SOME CONCLUSIONS AND OBSERVATIONS**

We suggest that young people’s relationship with the police largely reflects their relationship with society more broadly. As well as a focus on accountability and the police-public relationship when educating young people about the police, we suggest that inclusion should be a central concern in policing with the community. Improving community safety depends on the willing cooperation of young people, which is likely to be undermined by practices that make them feel under unreasonable suspicion. Our findings suggest that, in order to understand why young people do or do not support the police, we need to go beyond looking narrowly at the police service itself. Oppositional or disaffected views about the police reflect, in part, oppositional and disaffected views about wider society. Without denying the importance of fair and respectful police conduct, we suggest that there is a wider sense of disengagement and identification that needs to be tackled. Even if the police foster strong links with communities and are seen as guardians of the moral order, this will be of limited benefit if it is a moral order from which young people feel excluded.

With this in mind, we can consider a point of agreement between police officers and the young people they encounter: that the public frequently expect the police to move young people on when they are not necessarily doing anything wrong. While such requests may be motivated by genuine fears of crime and antisocial behaviour, it is crucial to appreciate that these problems are unlikely to be tackled by excluding young people from public space. On the contrary, it requires the active support of young people themselves, and such support risks being undermined by routinely treating them as suspicious. We therefore suggest that the manner of engagement with the adult population is important if the public are to appreciate what is and what is not a reasonable expectation of how the police use their authority. A desire to engage with the public should therefore not discourage the police from affirming principles of fairness in dealing with young people, even when this is not the most popular course of action. Moreover, our finding that views of the police may reflect how young people see their place in society also means that the solutions cannot just be left to police officers themselves.

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