

Police service faces unprecedented challenges amid global recession

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The issues are raised in a new Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) publication - What is policing for? Examining the impact and implications of contemporary policing intervention. The publication which highlights the views of experts presented during a Public Policy Seminar series organised by the ESRC in collaboration with the Scottish Institute for Policing Research, The Police Foundation, and the Universities' Police Science Institute.

In the booklet, seminar speakers draw on latest research findings to offer their answers to crucial questions such as: 'How responsive should policing be to community priorities and concerns?' 'Can and should the [police](#) solve more crime?' and 'What is the role for policing in securing economic and social well-being?'

Says Dr Timothy Brain, Chief Constable of Gloucestershire: "In many respects policing has never been stronger. It has emerged from the racial, political and social tensions of the 1980s and 1990s, and is delivering historically low levels of recorded crime.

"And yet all this achievement now hangs in the balance. First there is the threat of the deepening recession, then over-centralisation. Closely allied to centralism is bureaucracy. The final threat is that of politicisation. Times change; the police service must change. How the service should change is now the crucial question."

The police service has a wide range of weapons in its crime-fighting

armoury - from Zero Tolerance Policing to Anti-Social Behaviour Orders. Gated communities are more common, and closed-circuit television is omnipresent. Since 1997, over 3,000 new offences have been created and a wide range of new tools and powers have been introduced.

Professor Robin Williams, of Durham University, says: "The use of [forensic science](#), particularly DNA profiling, is now increasingly central to contemporary policing because it contributes to efforts to arrive at the truth amidst conflicting stories from victims, witnesses and suspects.

"However, some recent studies point to the dangers of misplaced confidence in many claims to scientific 'certainty' in the application of forensic technologies and their effective uses for crime control."

At the same time, police officers face the pressure of quantitative targets and league tables allied with budgetary constraints, and what Sally Burke, Chief Superintendent in South Wales Police, refers to as the "perception gap" - the fact that crime has been reduced significantly over the last decade, yet the fear of crime has not as most people don't believe the reported figures.

But as Nigel Fielding, Professor of Sociology at the University of Surrey concludes: "Police efforts can never fully meet the public's feelings of insecurity, which vary considerably. The police have to decide priorities, and that is, ultimately, a question of discretion."

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

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