

With a focus on deterrence, the first police force was a success

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The world's first professional police force, The London Metropolitan Police, deterred crime and brought a significant reduction in violent

crimes when it was introduced nearly 200 years ago. By using historical data, a new economics study examines the relationship between policing and crime levels.

Professional police forces are a fundamental part of criminal justice systems today. But how successful they are in reducing [crime](#) may be difficult to measure. Economics professor Randi Hjalmarsson, the School of Business, Economics and Law, and Associate Professor Anna Bindler, University of Cologne, examine the relationship between policing and crime levels by looking at the origins of the modern-day police: the introduction of the London Metropolitan Police (the Met) in 1829.

A shift from reactionary policing to prevention

The Met was introduced in a 7-mile area surrounding Charing Cross, London, while the City of London and areas outside of this radius were excluded. Before the introduction of the Met, policing in London was decentralized, community-organized and mostly reactionary. A system of rewards to add to rather poor salaries provided incentives to catch criminals, but not to deter them in the first place.

"The Met brought a substantial increase in police numbers, but perhaps most importantly, officer tasks shifted from a focus on reactionary policing towards crime prevention and deterrence. The officers started walking a regular beat, in recognizable uniforms, to prevent crime from happening," Randi Hjalmarsson says.

This institution was also characterized by organizational changes: centralized policing that introduced an incentive structure and emphasis on high quality, professional officer behavior. Subsequent police forces, not only across the counties and cities of England and Wales but also in the US and around the world, were modeled after this innovative

institution: the first professional police [force](#) tasked with deterring crime.

Significant reduction in violent crimes

Measuring crime and policing nearly 200 years ago is challenging. The researchers have used multiple sources of archival records, including digitized reports of trials at the Old Bailey (the Central Criminal Court of London and Middlesex), daily crime reports from eight stations throughout London that existed pre and post Met, and administrative records of the hiring and firing of the first Metropolitan Police. They compared crime levels before and after the introduction of the Met, and depending on the data source, they could also compare these changes to changes in crime in areas outside the Met's catchment area.

"We can conclude that the creation of the first professional police force was a success in many ways," Randi Hjalmarsson says.

Analyses of witnesses at the Old Bailey trials show that the new Metropolitan Police were indeed observed at locations geocoded to be in the Met's catchment area. There was a significant reduction in [violent crimes](#), as the number of robbery trials decreased by over 40 percent in the inner areas of London. There was no visible reduction in property crime, though there is evidence that this could be due to offsetting increases in solved crimes brought to trial and reporting rates. But, more crime reporting can also be seen as a success of the new police.

Parallels and differences in today's debate

"We find that the introduction of professional police increased safety by deterring crime and increasing reporting. If today's debates on police reform and budget cuts result in reduced force sizes or even the

elimination of local stations, taken at face value, our results suggest that crime may increase," Randi Hjalmarsson says, but also cautions that "though there are many parallels in today's [police](#) reform debate and that of two hundred years ago—use of force, impartiality, officer quality, centralization, and force size—there are also many differences both within the criminal justice system and society more generally."

The study "The Impact of the First Professional Police Forces on Crime" by Randi Hjalmarsson and Anna Bindler is published in the *Journal of the European Economic Association*.

More information: Anna Bindler et al, The Impact of the First Professional Police Forces on Crime, *Journal of the European Economic Association* (2021). [DOI: 10.1093/jeea/jvab011](https://doi.org/10.1093/jeea/jvab011)

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