

## Police set targets to investigate fewer than half of crimes

By Anna Mikhailova, Political Correspondent

POLICE are setting targets to investigate fewer than half of reported crimes, it has emerged.

One of UK's largest forces has decided it should "screen out" 56 per cent of cases – the equivalent of 145,000 offences a year – meaning they are no longer investigated.

The targets are being set amid concern from police that they are being asked to handle more cases with a dwindling number of officers.

Last night, MPs accused police of "downgrading" serious crimes and said victims were faced with a "postcode lottery" when it came to whether their case would be investigated properly.

Previously it has been reported that forces are failing to probe a rising number of crimes, including theft, assault and burglary. However, West Yorkshire is the first force found to be using targets for "screening out" cases.

The force has seen recorded crime rise 11 per cent year-on-year, according to figures released by the Office for National Statistics this summer. In July, it complained of "experiencing unprecedented levels of demand" and last year received an extra 23,000 999 calls.

The use of targets was revealed as chief constables warned that police face rising levels of "more complex" crime in coming years. Some cases are already being handled purely through computer algorithms to decide which merit investigation.

Last night, a West Yorkshire Police spokesman admitted the force had determined an “optimal” rate of crimes not to investigate but insisted this was not the same as a target.

A Channel 4 Dispatches investigation to be broadcast tonight found that, across the country, nearly one million crimes were being “screened out” without investigation.

Official data obtained by Dispatches through Freedom of Information requests from 25 police forces – two thirds of all forces in England and Wales – showed that more than a quarter of crimes were “screened out” with “little or no investigation”.

Rates at some forces were significantly higher. Bedfordshire and Greater Manchester police both said their “screen out” rates were 40 per cent. In Warwickshire, it was 33 per cent.

The number of cases the Metropolitan Police chooses not to investigate is also rising. The force “screened out” 34,164 crimes on the same day they were reported in 2017, up from 13,019 in 2016. In the first five months of this year, 18,093 investigations were closed within 24 hours.

Meanwhile, more than 450,000 reported bank frauds were automatically dismissed by a computer system over the past three years, official figures have shown.

Tim Loughton, the Conservative MP who sits on the Home Affairs committee, which oversees the work of police, said: “Police forces should be doing more on crime, rather than downgrading things people would consider serious crimes that should be investigated.

“It is a postcode lottery whether your crime gets investigated. Why is it that in, say, Sussex a crime will be properly investigated whereas in, say, Northumberland it won’t?”

A spokesman for the Home Office said: “We expect the police to take all reports of crime seriously, to investigate and to bring the offenders to court so that they can receive appropriate punishment.”

Marian Fitzgerald, a visiting professor of criminology at the University of Kent, said crimes being “screened out” typically included “theft, criminal damage, vandalism, thefts from cars”.

A spokesman for the National Police Chiefs’ Council said: “Police may choose not to investigate cases where there isn’t a prospect of a criminal justice outcome and the time spent on the investigation would not be proportionate.

“Policing is under strain, dealing with rising crime and demand that is more complex and an unprecedented terror threat with fewer officers.”

Julia Mulligan, Police and Crime Commissioner for North Yorkshire, said the force’s stated “optimal” screen-out rate of 56 per cent was concerning, adding: “Some ‘screening out’ is needed but that doesn’t mean to say that should be a target and it should be applied across the board.”

A West Yorkshire police spokesman said the force introduced the rate after reviewing 4,000 crimes and finding it was allocating too many crimes for further investigation. “We needed to focus our front-line officer time more appropriately,” he said.

“For example, a crime might be ‘screened out’ if it was relatively minor and offers no investigative opportunities,” he said, adding that all cases received a “primary investigation”, although this could be just a phone call.