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Public has given up on police solving crimes, says watchdog

Failure to investigate and prosecute offences has eroded trust, HM Inspectorate of Constabulary warns

By Charles Hymas, Home Affairs Editor

THE public has given up on the police solving crimes, an official report claims today, as it says officers have been “rumbled” for failing to investigate offences including burglary and theft.

Matt Parr, HM Inspector of Constabulary, said the failure of the police to investigate high-volume crimes such as car theft, minor assault and burglary was having a “corrosive” effect on the public’s trust in the police.

His comments follow a series of investigations by The Daily Telegraph revealing car thefts and burglaries were not being pursued. The report reveals that victims are losing faith and pulling out of prosecutions across nearly all crimes. It also shows the proportion of offences solved plummeted from 14 per cent in 2015 to 7.3 per cent in 2019.

Justice process

Percentage of police action taken on reported crimes vs victims pulling out of investigations, by force area:

Avon and Somerset

Reported crimes where police action taken: 11%

Cases in which victim pulled out: 26%

Bedfordshire

Action taken: 12%

Victim pulled out: 24%

Cambridgeshire

Action taken: 11%

Victim pulled out: 20%

Devon and Cornwall

Action taken: 14%

Victim pulled out: 28%

Derbyshire
Action taken: 20%
Victim pulled out: 15%

Gwent
Action taken: 11%
Victim pulled out: 28%

Hampshire
Action taken: 14%
Victim pulled out: 17%

Lancashire
Action taken: 10%
Victim pulled out: 28%

Lincolnshire
Action taken: 16%
Victim pulled out: 23%

Merseyside
Action taken: 16%
Victim pulled out: 27%

North Wales
Action taken: 14%
Victim pulled out: 31%

Staffordshire
Action taken: 14%
Victim pulled out: 25%

Sussex
Action taken: 11%
Victim pulled out: 22%

West Yorkshire
Action taken: 10%
Victim pulled out: 22%

Source: HMICFRS, Diverging Under Pressure

“I think these levels of volume crime resolution are corrosive for the long-term relationship between the public and police,” said Mr Parr as he noted the proportion of crimes closed because the victim did not support a prosecution had risen to 22.6 per cent in 2019 from 8.7 per cent in 2015.

“If you are the victim of a minor burglary or minor assault or car crime, I think people have now got to the stage where their expectations are low and the police live down to those expectations because they simply don’t have the capacity to deal with it.

“There are some worrying trends. Domestic abuse and sexual assault, where victims are no longer supporting the prosecution, is a more complex and worrying issue.

“But I think particularly in the volume crime area, the public has rumbled that the police capacity to deal with this is extremely limited.

“There are strikingly low figures about car crime resolution, meaning most of the public simply give up reporting it because the chances of anything positive happening are so slim.” Last night the Home Office warned police forces to “take action” to restore the public’s trust. A spokesman said: “In areas where services are not up to scratch we expect police to take action and implement the Inspectorate’s recommendations at pace.”

The Telegraph revealed last month the chances of police catching and successfully prosecuting car thieves had fallen almost five-fold in two years, with only one in 400 resulting in conviction.

A fortnight ago it revealed that four forces had not charged any thieves in the three months to September 2019, as the chances nationally of a theft resulting in a charge halved from 10.8 per cent in 2015 to 5.4 per cent, and from 2.6 per cent to 1.3 per cent for personal theft.

The Inspectorate warned that crime victims also faced unacceptably wide variations in their experience of how the police dealt with their crime, depending on where they lived. Analysis of 13 forces showed the proportion of crime resulting in police action ranged from 10 per cent in West Yorks and Cambs to 20 per cent in Derbys.

The number refusing to support a prosecution spanned 15 per cent in Derbys to 31 per cent in Devon and Cornwall. Cleveland, Northants, Warwicks and West Mercia – which were not in the 13 – were identified by inspectors as the worst performing.

Charging rates for domestic abuse ranged from 12 per cent in Devon and Cornwall and Staffs to 28 per cent in Derbys, while the proportion of victims refusing to support a prosecution was over 50 per cent in half the 13 forces.

The Telegraph revealed last weekend that the proportion of victims pulling out of investigations had doubled over all crimes since 2015 to 43.3 per cent for violence, 40.5 for rape, 32.2 for public order offences and 16.4 for robbery.

The Inspectorate blamed inexperienced officers who lacked the “appropriate” detecting skills being handed investigations and then struggling because of poor supervision and support. “Investigators may not follow all lines of inquiry and evidence may be lost. For a victim, this means a longer wait to see if there will be justice in their case, and less likelihood of there being any justice,” said the inspectors.

“This can increase distress and lead to a loss of faith in the criminal justice system. It can mean victims withdraw from the justice process altogether.”

The inspectors said three forces had such limited investigative capacity that it was a “cause of concern.”

The report warned that the Government's plans to recruit an extra 20,000 police officers would not solve all of the problems as recruitment would most likely benefit efficient forces that identified the skills they needed.

"Gaining more officers will only mask poor performance if forces are unable to effectively match resources to demand," the report said. "On its own, the increase in police numbers will not bring about the transformation in service and performance some forces need to achieve."

Martin Hewitt, of the National Police Chiefs' Council, said that the police priority was to ensure that victims had the confidence to report crimes.