

Don't blame our beleaguered bobbies on the beat for Britain's surging crime

- [JOHN SUTHERLAND](#) 7TH FEBRUARY 2020



Recent headlines make deeply uncomfortable reading for police officers CREDIT: JOE GIDDENS

Poor government decision-making has led us here

The latest headlines about policing and crime ought to come as no surprise. They are the entirely predictable consequence of the last ten years of government policy.

Policing in this country is facing something of a perfect storm. Crime is rising, certainly crime of the most serious kinds. Domestic murders are at a five-year high, knife crime is at an all-time high, the number of reported serious sexual offences has risen steeply and so it goes on.

But it is not just crime. Demand on policing is rising too, principally as a consequence of the vast gaps that have appeared in the delivery of other frontline public services. Shortfalls in the provision of emergency mental health care are mentioned most often, but it is happening right across the board. And policing is being asked to pick up the pieces.

But it is not just crime and demand. Complexity is rising too, driven primarily by spectacular advances in technology as both an enabler of crime and an accelerator of harm. The job of a police officer is infinitely more complex than it used to be.

And all of this is happening at a time when policing resources have fallen to their lowest levels in a generation or more. Between 2010 and 2018, 44,000 officers and staff were cut from policing in England and Wales alone and it would be impossible to maintain the illusion that you can take that many people out and expect the world to carry on as if nothing had changed.

Throughout much of the last ten years, we were told by senior figures in government that 'crime is down and police reform is working'. It became a mantra, repeated *ad nauseam* whenever their approach was questioned. But it turns out that neither part of that statement was true, with this week's headlines simply being the latest confirmation of the fact.

More recent government announcements - including the likely reversal of failed reforms to police bail and the recruitment of 20,000 police officers - carry an implicit acknowledgement of the failures of the recent past, but it is going to take time to mend the immense damage done. It might actually take a generation.

Policing lost 44,000 individuals in less than a decade but, just as importantly, it lost all their experience too, and there is no short term means of replacing that. Even if the government honours its pledge to recruit the 20,000, it will take time for them to start, time for them to train and years for them to gain the kind of front-line knowledge and expertise that has been lost. Even then, the number comes nowhere close to replacing the 44,000 cut since 2010.

Just as damaging as the overall cut in numbers has been the specific loss of community policing in many parts of the country. Neighbourhood teams are the very foundation on which effective policing is built and, in far too many cases, they have been lost to austerity.

Sir Robert Peel first suggested it almost two hundred years ago and it remains true to say that 'the police are the public and the public are the police'. Police officers have always been at their most effective when working hand in hand with the communities they serve. There is now an urgent need for reinvestment in policing, and in neighbourhood policing in particular.

The basic mismatch between officer numbers and the volume of crime and demand they are faced with means that there is a need to make some tough choices. Every crime matters to every victim - understandably so - but not every crime is equal. Domestic violence has to matter more than car crime. Knife crime has to matter more than shoplifting. Any crime that has a child or vulnerable adult victim has to matter more than one that doesn't. Everything can't be a priority - because, if everything is, then nothing is.

There is something else that we need to acknowledge here, and that is the extent to which police officers themselves are feeling all of this. The headlines make deeply uncomfortable reading for them. They know that too many victims of crime are being let down. They know that, in far too many instances, they aren't able to offer the kind of service that people want and expect. If you were to ask the vast majority of them why they joined, they would tell you simply, that they wanted to make a difference. The realisation that there aren't enough of them to be able to do that in every case is something that troubles them all.

I'm no blind apologist for the job I used to do. Policing is entirely imperfect and there are all sorts of ways in which it needs to get better. But the story of the last ten years is not one that we can simply ignore. It is not that the police are failing, it is that they have been failed.