

Public alarmed over fewest bobbies on the beat for more than a decade

People are concerned at the withdrawal of police from 'visible policing' with fewer officers seen on the beat than at any time in 12 years

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Premium

Nearly half of Britons say they never see a bobby on the beat, the highest level since records began more than 12 years ago, a new study reveals today.

Some 48 per cent say they never see police on street patrol, almost double the 26 per cent in 2012 and the highest since 2007, when records were started, according to the Police Foundation, an independent think tank.

Just 16 per cent of the public say they see a police foot patrol at least once a week, less than a half of what it was its peak of 39 per cent in 2010 and 2011 and down from 26 per cent in 2007, according to Office for National Statistics' (ONS) data unearthed by the foundation.

The think tank says the public are becoming increasingly disillusioned at the way the police have withdrawn from "visible local policing" although people acknowledge the blame lies with cuts that have seen more than 20,000 officers axed in the past five years.

The foundation, which is conducting a major strategic review of policing, says this has contributed to the first decline in public trust in the police since the Office for National Statistics' crime survey started tracking such attitudes in 2006.

It warns Britain may be at a "tipping point" in policing: "Public views are changing. Crime and policing have risen up the national agenda and ratings of local police are declining. This appears to reflect a widespread perception of police 'withdrawal' across multiple aspects of service.

"In the year to March 2019, public ratings for police understanding and acting on local concerns, being reliable, treating people fairly and of confidence in local police all took a turn for the worse."

The table below shows the latest crime figures. Demand for street patrols is among the top 10 policing priorities for the public, although tackling sexual violence and rape, and curbing knife crime and serious violence are accepted as the top two.

The foundation also conducted 28 focus groups in seven different police force areas which found victims were frustrated at the way police were simply reacting to crime rather than deterring it by active policing.

One said: “Where I live we get a lot of issues with kids on stolen mopeds, people delivering drugs...it’s a known [high-crime] area but you never see a local bobby, never see somebody on the beat like you used to, just putting people off as a deterrent more than anything, they are always having to react to something that has already happened.”

Another theme was the failure of police to respond to calls for assistance. One victim said: “I was living next to a neighbour for two years and she used to scream abuse at us...It was parties; it was drugs, smashing my garden up... She terrorised me and a couple of other neighbours. Multiple times we have phoned the police...and never once, over two years have the police come out.

Another complained at the lack of police investigation: “The police just weren’t interested, so you’re best to try to solve it through Facebook.”

While another criticised the lack of support for victims: “Now, it’s literally just a crime reference number for insurance, because they can’t do any more than that.”

Sir Michael Barber, the former No 10 adviser who is chairing the foundation’s review of policing, said: The public feel that the police have withdrawn from the street as resources have become more stretched.

“It is good that the Government has begun to address this problem with the commitment to 20,000 extra police officers. More positively, we found that the more fully citizens are engaged in discussion about crime, the challenges facing police and the need to prioritise, the stronger their understanding of, and respect for, the police becomes.”

A National Police Chiefs' Council spokesman said: "We are pleased that the public retain a positive opinion of the police service and this reflects the hard work of many officers, staff, special constables and volunteers.

“As we start to boost officer numbers, we will be able to do more proactive policing and bear down on crime and violence. This will help people to feel safer.

"We need support from government and other agencies to prevent police being called as a first resort where health and welfare provisions should exist.”