

Bobbies on beat slashed by a third

Frontline police numbers tumble as violence soars

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One in three bobbies on the beat in England and Wales have been axed in just three years as violent crime has surged.

A Sunday Times investigation found more than 7,000 traditional neighbourhood police officers, who protect communities and gather intelligence, have been reassigned to other duties or left jobs altogether since March 2015.

The number of police community support officers (PCSOs) has also fallen by 18% over the same time period to just over 10,000. Officers assigned to back-office and administrative roles have multiplied by a quarter in three years, despite ministers' pledges to protect "frontline" policing.

While figures from the official crime survey are flat, recorded violent crime in England and Wales has almost doubled, from 778,000 offences in 2015 to almost 1.4m in the year to March 2018.

The investigation also found:

- The Duke of Westminster's Grosvenor estate is understood to be in talks to provide funding for what could become Britain's largest private police force.

- The force with the fewest bobbies on the beat per head of population is Sussex, where just 8.3 neighbourhood officers patrol 100,000 people.
- Villagers in Martock, Somerset, have even hired a security firm to patrol late at night because of a lack of local police officers.
- Vigilantes now carry out three “stings” on suspected paedophiles every day — more than 100 a month — Dan Vazjovic, chairman of the National Police Chiefs’ Council working group on the issue, told The Sunday Times.

The analysis found a 20,000 drop in overall police numbers in recent years, with cuts falling disproportionately on neighbourhood officers, described as the “bedrock” of policing. The analysis of Home Office statistics reveals numbers of bobbies on the beat fell by a third, from 23,928 in March 2015 to 16,557 in March 2018.

This weekend Lord Stevens, the former Scotland Yard commissioner, said the investigation’s findings were “incredibly alarming” because public confidence in the police is linked to “officers on the street in uniform”.

“If the increase in violent crime carries on escalating, you are going to get a very dangerous tipping point where there is no control, and it is a very difficult thing to bring back. I don’t think we’ve reached that point yet and, God willing, we won’t,” he added.

The research reveals the number in “visible frontline” roles has fallen by more than 10% in three years to 62,977, just over half of the 122,000 police officers in England and Wales. The government insists 92% of officers are “frontline” but they include more than 40,000 officers in “non-visible” roles such as intelligence analysts.

The number of officers in back office, legal departments and human resources has jumped from 3,528 to 4,434.

Simon Cole, chief constable of Leicestershire police and national lead for local policing, said cyber- crime, “county lines” (drug dealing controlled from cities) and the changing face of terrorism meant that frontline officers also needed support from IT and training experts. “Reductions in budgets means we have to do things differently,” he said.

Violent deaths in London this year have reached 100, while in England and Wales homicides leapt from 539 to 736 in the three years to March 2018.

The Home Office said: “Decisions about frontline policing, and how resources are best deployed, are for chief constables and democratically accountable police and crime commissioners.”

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