

Improving public confidence in the police: a review of the evidence

Andrew Rix, Faye Joshua, Professor Mike Maguire and Sarah Morton

Key implications

- A rapid assessment of the available literature on public confidence in the police as well as an assessment of local practice schemes with the potential for wider implementation was undertaken. Interventions were classified (according to the quality of evidence in support of them) into three main categories: what works; what looks promising; and potential pitfalls.
- Overall the evidence suggests that the strategies most likely to be effective in improving confidence are initiatives aimed at increasing community engagement. Three out of the four interventions classified in the 'what works' evidence all included an element of communicating and engaging with the community (embedding neighbourhood policing; high quality community engagement; and using local-level communications/newsletters).
- There is strong evidence to support the continuation and embedding of neighbourhood policing, though the quality of implementation is critical as all three components of neighbourhood policing (targeted foot patrol; community engagement; and effective problem-solving) need to be fully delivered to achieve intended impacts.
- Restorative justice face-to-face meetings mediated by police officers also improved perceptions of the criminal justice system, including the police.
- Among the interventions that looked promising for increasing confidence, targeting confidence-building activities to localised areas where they are most needed was of particular interest. If further evaluation shows this intervention to be successful, then it could prove an intelligent approach to efficiently achieving increases in confidence with limited resources.
- One considerable potential pitfall to increasing confidence is the organisational culture change required. If some police officers do not believe that the community-policing approach is feasible or desirable then this can hinder the quality of delivery.
- To deliver any confidence-building intervention successfully, a high quality of implementation is required. Without high quality implementation there is a risk that a reduction in confidence could occur.
- It should not be assumed that the same interventions will work in every area and in every situation. The best practice for any community is one that fits their needs and conditions and is compatible with available resources.
- Local monitoring and evaluation of confidence-related interventions should be undertaken to measure whether they are achieving their intended impact and revisions made as necessary.
- Increasing and maintaining public confidence in the police should be seen as a long-term continuous process with time taken to understand and address the expectations of different communities.

Contents

Summary	1
Introduction	4
Approach	5
Results	6
Conclusion	19

Keywords

Confidence in the police
Policing
Community policing
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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors, not necessarily those of the Home Office (nor do they reflect Government policy).

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Context

It is important that the public feel confident in the police and other crime-fighting agencies. We know that crime has fallen considerably in the last ten years but the public are not feeling the impact of this and believe crime is rising. In 2008 the Government published the Green Paper *From the neighbourhood to the national: policing our communities together* which proposed a single top-down target to replace the multiple targets previously used to monitor police performance. The single target is to improve levels of public confidence that the police and local councils are dealing with the crime and anti-social behaviour issues that matter locally, as measured by the British Crime Survey. Individual targets were set for each police force and published in March 2009.

To inform evidence-based guidance to forces on how to improve performance, a literature review was commissioned to summarise the best available evidence on 'what works' in terms of improving public confidence in the police and to identify what other interventions look promising and merit further exploration.

Approach

The review consisted of a rapid assessment of the available literature on public confidence in the police as well as an assessment of local practice schemes with the potential for wider implementation. The interventions were classified into three main categories:

1. **What works:** those that had demonstrated improvements in public confidence as measured by an evaluation (at least one evaluation of the intervention must have been rated at level 3 or above on the

Maryland Scale of Scientific Methods¹);

2. **What looks promising:** examples where the available evidence did not rate at level 3 or higher on the Maryland Scale or was insufficient to reliably conclude that it would improve public confidence, but where there was some practical basis for considering that it had the potential to bring about improvements in confidence (e.g. the intervention was based on preparatory work such as survey data on what people thought would increase their confidence or experienced practitioners' views); and
3. **Potential pitfalls:** examples of potential difficulties encountered in implementing confidence-building interventions.

Due to the tight timescale for the review, it is possible that some relevant evidence has not been covered. It is also possible that the categorisation of some interventions into "what works" and "what looks promising" could change following further evidence. It is, however, assumed that all key studies have been included.

Results

Tables 1 to 3 below list 1) the interventions identified that can work to improve public confidence; 2) the interventions that look promising but require further exploration; and 3) the potential pitfalls to achieving high quality implementation.

- 1 The Maryland Scale of Scientific Methods was developed by Sherman *et al.* (1997) for reviewing crime prevention interventions. It is a five-point scale for classifying the strength of methodologies used in "what works?" studies. For further detail see http://www.gsr.gov.uk/professional_guidance/rea_toolkit/how_to_do_an_rea/how_appraising_studies.asp

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Table 1: What interventions work?

Intervention	Main evidence
<p>1) Embedding neighbourhood policing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Implemented in full including: a) increased targeted foot patrol; b) community engagement to identify community priorities for action; and c) effective problem-solving. 	<p>Tuffin <i>et al.</i> (2006) Skogan and Steiner (2004) Skogan and Hartnett (1997)</p>
<p>2) High quality community engagement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Making contact with residents/businesses as they go about foot patrol. ● Responding to public-initiated contact in a polite and respectful manner. 	<p>Criminal Justice Commission (1995) Bennett (1991) Pate <i>et al.</i> (1986) Myhill and Beak (2008)</p>
<p>3) Local-level communications/newsletters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Tell people clearly what the local agencies in a neighbourhood are doing. ● Ensure communication is: a) area-specific; b) gives detail of what is being delivered, including agency responses to problems; c) provides information on actions that are planned; and d) includes contact details of how to access services. 	<p>MPS (2008) Singer and Cooper (2008) Salisbury (2004)</p>
<p>4) Restorative justice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Victims, offenders and sometimes the families involved collectively decide how to deal with the aftermath of the offence and its implications for the future. 	<p>Shapland <i>et al.</i> (2007)</p>

Table 2: What interventions are promising?

Intervention	Main evidence
<p>1) Targeting confidence activity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Allocating resources to where public satisfaction could be improved most (e.g. areas with a disproportionate fear of crime compared to actual crime levels in their area). 	<p>West Yorkshire Police (2008)</p>
<p>2) Using a variety of public consultation methods</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Gives the greatest chance of reaching a range of demographic groups across diverse communities. ● Could consist of focus groups, public meetings, online surveys, citizen panels, road shows and committee meetings. 	<p>Lancashire Police Authority (2008)</p>
<p>3) Training and educating members of the community</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Tackling any public misconceptions of the risk of being a victim of crime. ● Recruiting key individuals in the community to promote police and other local agency work. 	<p>Singer and Cooper (2008) Innes <i>et al.</i> (2009) Dubois and Hartnett (2002)</p>
<p>4) Improving community engagement skills of police officers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ensuring officers and partner agencies are adequately prepared for building confidence through direct interaction with the public. 	<p>Sadd and Grinc (1994) Haarr (2001) Skogan <i>et al.</i> (1999)</p>
<p>5) Using multi-agency public consultation and communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Maximising resources for hosting consultations and disseminating information. ● Reducing 'consultation fatigue' through holding joint, and therefore fewer, events and facilitating multi-agency problem-solving. 	<p>Tyne and Wear Public Service Board (2008) Myhill <i>et al.</i> (2003) Long <i>et al.</i> (2002) Skogan <i>et al.</i> (1999)</p>
<p>6) Alleviating visual signs of crime and disorder (e.g. fly-tipping, graffiti, and abandoned vehicles)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Clear council reporting and action procedures will facilitate quick responses to problems before they get out of control. ● Publicising successful improvements could help further increase public confidence. 	<p>Innes and Roberts (2007) LGA (2006) Dalglish and Myhill (2004) Wilson and Kelling (1982)</p>

Table 3: What are the potential pitfalls?

Intervention	Main evidence
<p>1) Consultation meetings not achieving full representation of the local community</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence has suggested that formal mechanisms for consultation are mainly attended by unrepresentative members of the community, being biased towards older, White, middle-class citizens. Consideration should be given on how to encourage and consult with the whole community. 	<p>Skogan and Hartnett (1997) Myhill <i>et al.</i> (2003)</p>
<p>2) Highlighting crime and ASB too much</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dialogue centred on crime levels and insecurity may stimulate feelings of threat or fear among those listening to such messages, and in turn lower opinions of the police. 	<p>Jackson and Bradford (2007)</p>
<p>3) Employees' negative talk about their organisation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The police have a lower perception of their service than other public sector workers and are least likely to speak highly about the CJS as a whole. It has been suggested that if the police were to talk negatively about their job in public then this may lower public perceptions of the police. 	<p>Duffy <i>et al.</i> (2008) Edwards (2006)</p>
<p>4) Community engagement is not perceived throughout the police service as important policing work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If time is not protected for officers to work on community engagement, there is a risk that officers are abstracted to other duties which can impact on the quality of community engagement. 	<p>Vito <i>et al.</i> (2005) Irving <i>et al.</i> (1989) Haarr (2001)</p>

Overall the evidence suggests that the strategies most likely to be effective in improving confidence are initiatives aimed at increasing community engagement. Three out of the four interventions classified in the 'what works' findings all included an element of communicating and engaging with the community and this was also found in many of the 'what looks promising' interventions.

There is strong evidence to support the continuation and embedding of neighborhood policing to increase confidence, though the quality of implementation is important as previous Home Office research has found that all three components of neighbourhood policing (targeted foot patrol; community engagement; and effective problem-solving) need to be fully delivered to achieve intended impacts.

A high quality of implementation is required to achieve intended impacts and local monitoring and evaluation of interventions should be undertaken to measure whether they are achieving their intended impact. It should also not be assumed that the same intervention will work in every area and in every situation. The best practice for any community is one that fits their needs and conditions and can be delivered with available resources.