INFLUENCING TRUST AND CONFIDENCE IN THE LONDON METROPOLITAN POLICE

Results from an Experiment Testing the Effect of Leaflet Drops on Public Opinion

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Enhancing trust and confidence has moved to the centre of policing policy in England and Wales. The association between direct encounters with police officers and confidence in the police is well-established. But is it possible for the police to increase confidence among the general population including those people who do not routinely come into direct contact with police officers? This paper presents the findings from a quasi-randomised experiment conducted on population representative samples in seven London wards that assessed the impact of a leaflet drop on public perceptions of policing. The results provide strong evidence of an improvement in overall confidence, and in perceptions of police–community engagement, specifically. The leaflets also appear to have had a buffering effect against declines in public assessments of police effectiveness. The findings support the idea that public trust and confidence can be enhanced by direct police communication of this type.

Keywords: trust and confidence, police communication, quasi-randomized experiment

Introduction

Communication lies at the heart of any relationship between police and public. This is true on both an operational level and when considering the deeper relationships between police and policed. The reliance of the British police on the public—for information, for assistance and, in general, cooperation—means that effective and meaningful communication is vital if the activities of policing are to be in any way efficient or successful. Equally, communication from the police to the public about activities, strategies and objectives, constitutes a vital component of the democratic transparency of the police. But interaction between individual officers, the police organization and the public as individuals or as members of social groups is also suffused with meaning. The police as a public institution may represent—jointly or variously—social order, the nation, the state or the dominant social group (Girling et al. 2000; Jackson and Bradford 2009; Loader and Mulcahy 2003; Loader 2006; Reiner 2000; Tyler 1990; Waddington 1999). When communicating with the public, the police speak to people within these overarching social and political contexts. As Loader (2006: 211) reminds us, all police activities 'send small, routine, authoritative signals about societies' conflicts, cleavages and hierarchies, about whose claims are considered legitimate within it, about whose status identity is to be affirmed or denied as part of it'.

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These notions of the nature of police communication enjoin concepts of trust, confidence and legitimacy. 'Trust and confidence', a catch-all phrase within British debates around policing (Jackson and Sunshine 2007) condenses a range of possible viewpoints or orientations towards the police, such as with regard to people's understandings of police effectiveness, fairness and level of engagement with the public (Bradford et al. 2009; Jackson and Bradford in press). Implicit in the use of 'trust and confidence' is the idea that trust underlies and in part helps constitute the legitimacy of the police, in terms of its right to be recognized as authoritative over certain aspects of life (Habermas 1979) and in the perceived duty to defer to it and obey its commands (Sunshine and Tyler 2003b; Tyler 1990; Weber 1978).

Trust, confidence and legitimacy are then vital not only on normative or ethical grounds, but because they foster support and cooperation. The extent to which people have trust in the police and hold it to be legitimate will impact on their propensity to cooperate with, and defer to, officers across the whole range of policing activities. The procedural justice model developed by Tom Tyler and colleagues (Tyler 1990; 2006; Tyler and Huo 2002) proposes that trust and legitimacy are developed through and expressed by police activities—treating people with fairness, dignity and respect—that communicate to people shared group membership with the police. As 'proto-typical group representatives' (Sunshine and Tyler 2003a) police speak to individuals about their membership of, or exclusion from, nation, state or society, and do so in part by communicating shared values and priorities.

These conceptual relationships appear not to have gone unnoticed within the UK government (Home Office 2008): current academic and policy-oriented perspectives converge in stressing the importance of enhancing, or at least not damaging, trust in the police. This is, of course, particularly important in a system that still places great ideological emphasis on 'policing by consent' (Reiner 2000), and these issues have firmly inserted themselves in the performance management framework for the police in England and Wales. Trust and confidence, as measured in surveys such as the British Crime Survey (BCS) and the Metropolitan Police's Public Attitude Survey (PAS), became the core performance indicator of the police at both national and local levels in April 2009 (see Home Office n.d.). According to this measure, the key to better performance is confidence among the public as a whole.

The expectation of improving confidence that is embedded in the new target regime presents opportunities in terms of developing a less conflictual relationship between police and public. It has shifted debate on policing firmly into an arena in which the connections between police and policed take centre stage. Issues such as the role of the police as servants of the public and the need to align organizational and public priorities are emphasized to a far greater extent than was hitherto often the case. But the new regime also provides stiff challenges. The impact of personal encounters with police officers on public trust in police fairness and engagement specifically, and trust, confidence and legitimacy more generally, is widely evidenced (Bradford et al. 2009; Skogan 2006; Tyler and Fagan 2008). However, only relatively few people have direct contact with police on any regular basis. Ways will need to be found to 'reach out' to those who have little or no such contact and who, in terms of the procedural justice model, will be relatively distant from any personal experiences of fair treatment (although they may well be influenced by media reports and vicarious experiences). If public opinion is to become the key measure of performance, how are police to influence it in meaningful, and sustainable, ways?

This article addresses a practical development arising from evolving debates about British policing formed in the context of change in UK government policies over the past decade. Policing as a public service is now far more welded to its (or at least a) local base. In London in particular (where the experiment described here took place), Safer Neighbourhoods policing provides a dedicated team for each council ward. Driven by political pressure towards providing more 'service'-led, 'customer friendly' policing, one of the problems is how to 'tell'/'inform'/'demonstrate' police activities to a citizen audience that often has little contact with the service. Police are now required to think about how people—most of whom have little experience of the police—can feel confident in the 'citizen offer' of this public service.

It is within this context that the present study examines the potential of direct written communication between police and the general public for enhancing trust and confidence. What, if any, impact can such a form of telling—that is, a local newsletter—have on the way people feel about the police? We report the findings from a natural quasi-randomized experiment on a large, representative sample of people living in seven London wards carried out on behalf of the Metropolitan Police Service in Spring 2008. To anticipate the key findings, information provision that demonstrates engagement with local issues, and which reports back on operations initiated and conducted based on a shared understanding of the needs and priorities of local people can significantly improve public opinion. The study suggests that messages communicated to the wider public via newsletters can tap into the underlying structures and processes involved in lay assessments of 'engagement', particularly with regard to the communication of shared values and priorities. We conclude that effective and meaningful communication, in whatever form, is an important element of the formative processes that underpin legitimacy, trust and confidence in the police.

Communication, Legitimacy and Trust

Some recent approaches to legitimacy within political science correspond with the ideas of the procedural justice model by stressing the centrality of shared values (in the broadest sense of that term) in the proper understanding of legitimacy (Beetham 1991; Coicaud 2002; Sadurski 2008; cf. Tyler 1990; 2006; Tyler and Huo 2002). Many of these accounts emphasize that the justification of legitimacy does not reside in the (legitimized) authority itself, but rather in its intended subjects or, perhaps more correctly, in actors' perceptions of the directives that issue from the authority (although see Barker (2001) for an opposing view that stresses the importance of the actions of authorities in legitimating themselves, an idea of obvious relevance in the present context). For an authority such as the police to be considered properly legitimate and worthy of deference, those subject to it must see in its directives—and its communications—a reflection of their own values, principles and priorities. Of course, such value alignment is not the only component of, or justification for, legitimacy. Legal validity—the adherence to commonly recognized rules (Beetham 1991) and what might be termed 'output' validity—the ability of an authority to actually produce the desired outcomes that go along with its remit, are also important aspects of legitimacy (Habermas 1976; 1979).

For some people and social groups, justifications for police legitimacy are likely to be reflected in and by aspects of those dominant 'structures of feeling' (Williams 1964; cf. Loader and Mulcahy 2003) that still link the police and public in an almost 'mythical'

way (Reiner 2000). In such cases, the mere existence and activity of the police, as long as it is directed against the criminal other, may often be enough justification for its continued legitimacy. In contrast, among those designated as that criminal other, or among other marginalized or stigmatized groups, relationships with the police may operate under quite different structures of feeling, wherein any link between police and public has been definitively broken. However, between these extremes is a wide middle ground within which agreeing on shared values, principles and priorities is an interactive process that requires communication, negotiation and, for the police, the transmission of messages that it and the public are, in effect, on 'the same side'. Likewise, to the extent that legal and output validity are important to police legitimacy, these must also be communicated in some way.

Such messages are also key components of trust relationships. Indeed, individual's trust judgments about the police are likely to be key influences on the legitimacy they grant to it (Bradford and Jackson 2010). Public trust in the police is bound up in the relationships between police and people, which, following Barber (1983), we suggest will involve three important elements and expectations: that officers will behave in certain ways in certain circumstances (based on a shared understanding of what proper behaviour is in a specific situation); that police are technically competent in the roles assigned to them; and that officers will carry out their duties such that they place the interests of others above their own. For Barber, such trust rests on a shared understanding about the nature and trajectory of the social world, to which actions of the trustee are expected to conform. Similarly, Goldsmith (2005) links trust in the police to Six's (2003) dimensions of trustworthiness: ability, benevolence, dedication and ethics. With regard to the relationship between police and public, these constitutive aspects of trust cannot be taken for granted but must, again, be demonstrated as part of the on-going, communicative process.

Differentiating between public perceptions of—or trust in—police effectiveness, community engagement and fairness therefore allows us to tap into many of the ideas and orientations thought to underlie both trust and legitimacy (Bradford et al. 2009; Jackson and Bradford in press; Stanko and Bradford 2009). Communication—of whatever type—between police and public will contain messages relating to the trustworthiness of the police across all three aspects, but evidence collected under the procedural justice model and elsewhere suggests that the most powerful and convincing example of such communication is through action and face-to-face interaction. If officers treat people fairly and decently, and use proper procedures, this can communicate shared values and shared group membership, and legitimacy and trust can be enhanced (Tyler and Fagan 2008; Tyler and Huo 2002; Sunshine and Tyler 2003a; 2003b). Of course, on many occasions, the police act in other ways, and communicate exactly the opposite message, one of exclusion, difference and confrontation (Brunson 2007; Carr et al. 2007; McAra and McVie 2005; Stoutland 2001; Waddington 1999).

But the question raised above remains—what of those who do not have (recent) contact with the police? The police are now being asked to influence trust and/or legitimacy across the entire population, including those with whom they have little face-to-face interaction, and whose attitude formation thus relies on other sources, including, perhaps, what they have learned from others, reinforced through a wide range of fictional and non-fictional media accounts. The police must demonstrate awareness of

and sympathy with the values and priorities of the public as a whole. Furthermore, because trust is part of a social relationship, acts of communication need to demonstrate engagement between the parties involved and constitute one part of an iterative process through which police learn from the public as well as demonstrate the things that make it worthy of trust. Although police currently 'communicate' with the public through their own 'news' about operations and crime prevention literature, little of this has to do with the very local contexts within which people experience crime and disorder, nor is it targeted towards what people are most concerned about. Finally, we cannot ignore the possibility of interactions between the effects of the media on public opinion and how people experience policing in their local area; the analysis presented below includes consideration of the possible effects of predominant media stories about the police at the time the experiment took place.

Style and Content of Communication: Normative and Practical Considerations

Previous Home Office (Chapman et al. 2002; Salisbury 2004) and Ministry of Justice (Singer and Cooper 2008) research has demonstrated that the provision of information to members of the public may have an effect on their confidence in the criminal justice system. Salisbury (2004) found that the provision to British Crime Survey (BCS) respondents of a booklet containing a number of relevant facts, for example pertaining to the proportion of all crime involving violence and the proportion of custodial sentences handed down to rapists and burglars, both improved knowledge of the criminal justice system among those receiving it and appeared to be linked to higher levels of confidence. Singer and Cooper (2008) report the results of a randomized control trial that demonstrated that levels of confidence in the effectiveness of the criminal justice system in bringing offenders to justice was higher in the experimental group (who received a similar booklet) than in the control group (who did not).

This earlier work started from a somewhat different premise from that informing the quasi-experiment reported here. Both Home Office and Ministry of Justice projects had at their heart the idea that the public is misinformed about crime and the criminal justice system, and that this is linked directly to lower levels of confidence: if levels of knowledge and awareness can be improved, uplift in trust and confidence should result. The disconnect between public ideas about crime, policing and the courts, and the 'reality' experienced by criminal justice professionals is, of course, well known, and it is certainly the case that the public can be seriously wrong in its beliefs about these topics (Roberts and Hough 2005). However, a project that simply aimed to 're-educate' people about the reality of crime and policing in their local area, especially one initiated and implemented by the police, seems likely to run into a number of difficulties. On a very basic level, it is unlikely local residents would react well to an assertion that levels of crime and disorder in their area are in fact very different from those that they themselves may perceive. But, more fundamentally, the classic articulation of police with state and class power (Choongh 1997; Waddington 1999) has significant implications for the type of communication reported here, as it does for any police–public interaction. Direct communication between police and public occurs within a broader social context that implies, among other things, a fundamental power imbalance between police and policed. For many people, 'the police' are a distant, almost taboo object (Smith 2007), while, for others, policing is a coercive, even threatening presence in their everyday

lives. Newsletters and similar devices run the risk not only of appearing to the public as missives from a remote power, but actually being so, for example if they are produced in an non-reflexive manner intended simply to correct 'erroneous' ideas and that does not take into account local concerns and priorities.

Intended in part to address such concerns, some scholars have pointed to the relevance to policing of the four validity claims inherent in the 'ideal speech' situations theorized by Habermas (Loader 1996; Mawby 2002). These ideas have the potential to alleviate some of the power imbalances between police and policed and place police–public interaction (or communication) on a more equitable basis. In the ideal speech situation, in which all sides have an equal opportunity to express and defend their views, there is an implicit assumption that all speakers can make and justify four claims about what they are saying: that it is comprehensible, that it is truthful, that it is correct in context, and that it is sincere (Mawby 2002: 69; cf. Outhwaite 1994). This set of claims can be used as basic principles informing the nature and content of communication between police and public, including newsletters of the type discussed here. Furthermore, an ability to answer the questions such claims invite—'What do you mean?', 'Is what you say true?', 'Are you entitled to say that?' and 'Do you really mean it?' (Outhwaite 1994: 40)—will also be vital if trust and legitimacy in the senses outlined above are to be influenced in a positive manner. People will quickly see through any police communication that addresses events in their local area that cannot, at least implicitly, answer these questions.

While police–public communication is not and can never be an ideal speech situation, the four validity claims outline both a normative and an explanatory understanding that provides a route through the difficulties inherent in the experiment described here. They should also underpin any attempts to either replicate the experiment or apply its results in a more general way. A carefully ethical approach is especially necessary as the police face the challenges of an increasingly media-dominated public sphere, within which the police increasingly move from being simply the object of news stories (for example) towards being 'mediators' themselves (Mawby 2002; Wright 2000). In sum:

. . . there is an organisational need for the police to communicate effectively and to construct and communicate an image appropriate to their role, as one aspect of the legitimation process. (But) it is also crucial for legitimacy that there is a concern not simply with appearance, or with the strategic management of impressions (Goffman 1959: 90), but with substance, aligning image management with transparency and accountability. (Mawby 2002: 72)

As part of the broader project of which the experiment described here was part, the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) developed a 'good practice' model of police communication in an attempt to address some of these issues (Wünsch and Hohl 2009). Based on the findings from a series of focus groups, interviews and surveys carried out in London, the model condenses key findings regarding public perceptions and needs concerning information from and about the police in general, and the MPS website and local policing newsletters in particular, into a set of five good practice principles of police communication. First, study participants expressed a need to receive more information about crime and policing directly from police (not only through other sources, like, for example, the media). Newsletters thus need to be instantly recognizable as coming directly from the police. Second, newsletters need to pertain to the immediate local area. One of the key findings of the studies is that information about local crime

and disorder issues and what the police are doing about them carries the most meaning and relevance. This pertains to the third point: knowing that the police are aware of local problems and are tackling them is perceived as reassuring. Fourth, newsletters should help in making the police more accessible, such as by providing clear details about how to get in touch with the local police team. Finally, the writing style should be professional but remain simple and approachable, avoiding police jargon and technical terms. It is important for police communication to be perceived as inclusive of and directed to everyone.

The pros and cons of using newsletters to attempt to influence public opinion seem straightforward. On one hand, they allow police to control fully the content of messages going, potentially, to all people living in a given area, and can further be tailored to suit local conditions, situations and priorities. But, equally, leaflets are 'weak treatments'. There is no certainty over how many will be read, what messages will be taken from them or how long contents will remain in people's minds. After a summary, below, of the research questions that structure our analysis, we turn to describing the experiment that tested the effect of a newsletter drop on public confidence and perceptions of the police.

Research Questions

Our intention here is to concentrate on the possibility of police communicating directly with the public and, in doing so, enhance trust and confidence. Four questions guide this study:

(1) Can police communication via newsletters be linked to improvements in its engagement with people's priorities? Engagement is a key component in securing trust and legitimacy, and we test whether leaflets are an effective device in demonstrating this to the wider public.
(2) Does the newsletter influence the second main driver of public confidence—police effectiveness? The newsletter reports successes in addressing local crime and disorder issues, and we test whether learning 'second-hand' about successes can enhance perceptions of effectiveness.
(3) Does the newsletter influence people's understanding of how police would act in personal encounters, namely fairness? Tacit expectations of police fairness are key elements underlying legitimacy, trust and confidence and this is likely to be the case whether people have had recent personal contact or not. We test whether the newsletter works as a device to communicate that the police are respectful, fair and helpful.
(4) And, finally, does newsletter communication enhance overall confidence in the police?

Research Design, Data and Method of Analysis

To answer these research questions, a quasi-randomized experiment was conducted in London in Spring 2008. To give a brief orientation of the experimental set-up before describing it in greater detail, the design included a test group of wards that received a newsletter and a control group of wards that did not receive a newsletter. Within both

groups of wards, respondents were randomly split into a before (the newsletter dissemination) and an after group.

At the core of the experiment was the delivery of 17,117 newsletters to all households in three electoral wards in London. The newsletter dissemination is the 'intervention' or treatment in the quasi-randomized experiment. Each ward received a newsletter tailored to their local area; the content and layout were designed based on the five good practice principles (Wünsch and Hohl 2009) outlined above. Accordingly, the newsletter reported what the local police team had done to find out about the concerns of local people (e.g. carried out surveys or held public meetings), attempted to demonstrate that the police understand the issues raised by local people (by reporting these and sharing these with all households on the ward) and, finally, reported the action the police had taken in response to these problems and how successful the action had been (e.g. a successful operation against drug dealing on a particular estate, in response to concerns raised by local residents). In sum, the aim of the newsletter was not to 'educate' the public about crime, but to inform people about what the police were actually doing locally.

In order to measure the effect of the newsletter, the day of the newsletter dissemination was chosen to fall into the fieldwork period of the 2008 Safer Neighbourhoods Survey (SNS) commissioned by the Metropolitan Police Service and administered to a random sample representative of residents (aged 16 and over) of seven electoral wards in London (including the three wards that received the localized newsletter). The survey asks a range of questions, including measures of confidence in the police, perceptions of crime and disorder, attitudes towards and contact with the police, victimization and the fear of crime. A total of 2,836 face-to-face interviews were carried out between 1 May and 31 July 2008. All newsletters were disseminated on the same day halfway through the fieldwork, 10 June 2008.

Since respondents were allocated random interview dates within the survey period, the day of the newsletter drop divides the sample into two (random)halves, thereby creating a quasi-randomized experiment. The randomization effectively controls for all differences—other than the newsletter drop—between the respondents interviewed before and the respondents interviewed after the day of the newsletter drop. Any statistically significant differences in the responses given by respondents interviewed before and after the day of the newsletter drop can therefore be expected to be due to something that happened on the day of the leaflet drop. A control group was also included in the analysis, namely interviewees residing in the four other wards covered by the SNS survey that did not receive a newsletter during the fieldwork period. The control wards allow us to measure and control for potentially confounding effects from events coinciding with the newsletter dropping (such as local or national media reports concerning the police, crime or some other relevant factor).

Naturally, this will not have been the first time many respondents to the survey received a newsletter or similar communication from the police. The test as well as the control wards included in the study are spread across London and were selected to represent a wide range of past and current newsletter practice and experience. They are diverse with regard to age structure, ethnicity, employment status and the percentage of respondents that had had contact with police and/or had been a victim of crime within the last year. Table 1 gives an overview of the structure of the sample.

Table 1   Description of the sample: socio-demographic make-up by ward

	Test wards			Control wards				Summary	
	Bethnal Green North	Canning Town South	Upper Edmonton	Kenton West	Mayesbrook	New Cross	Roehampton	Test wards	Control wards
Percentages (%)									
Women	54	59	57	52	57	55	62	56	56
Age									
15–17	3	4	2	3	2	3	2	3	3
18–21	5	5	4	5	5	4	7	5	5
22–34	37	30	26	19	23	31	28	31	25
35–44	20	21	21	19	19	25	16	21	20
45–54	10	13	19	16	16	17	11	14	15
55–64	9	12	11	15	13	10	11	11	12
65+	16	14	17	24	22	9	24	16	20
Ethnic group									
White British/Irish/other	60	61	46	37	78	42	70	56	57
Mixed	1	2	2	1	2	4	1	2	2
Indian	1	1	4	45	2	2	1	2	12
Pakistani/Bangladeshi	27	8	2	2	1	1	3	12	2
Caribbean	3	6	16	4	4	18	7	8	8
African	3	16	15	2	10	21	6	11	10
Other ethnic group	5	5	15	8	3	12	11	8	8
Employment status									
Full-time	41	40	39	45	38	47	34	40	41
Part-time	7	8	9	9	6	7	9	8	8
Unemployed	4	5	7	2	4	5	4	5	4
Economically inactive	37	39	37	35	43	28	41	38	37
Student	8	7	5	6	6	9	9	7	8
Other	3	1	2	3	2	3	2	2	3
Car owner	36	55	63	83	63	47	44	51	59
Limiting disability	15	14	15	12	21	12	17	15	15
Victim of crime	15	17	16	9	18	13	12	16	13
Contact with police	24	26	23	19	25	29	18	24	23
Ward deprivation level									
(IMD score) (numbers)*	49	55	37	11	32	35	32	47	27

Total sample size = 2,830. Unweighted data.

*Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) score 2004, higher values = greater deprivation.

Source: London Metropolitan Police Safer Neighbourhoods Survey 2008.

Once grouped together, the group of test wards has almost the same socio-demographic make-up as the group of control wards, with the exception that the test wards are more deprived than the control wards. In order to rule out the possibility of differences in the demographic, social, economic make-up or any other characteristics of the wards accounting for the 'newsletter' effect, we control for all systematic differences between test and control wards prior to the newsletter drop within the statistical analysis. This requires making the important assumption that if exterior factors intruded on the day of the letter drop (e.g. media reports), control and test wards were affected in the same way and by the same coinciding events. The geographical spread and socio-demographic diversity of the wards within the group of control wards and within the group of test wards strengthens the research design, as it renders the possibility of coinciding events that occurred only on the test wards or only on the control wards unlikely (far more likely would be 'London-wide' events that affected all respondents in some way).

The effect of the newsletter drop, then, can be found in the 'difference between the difference', namely the difference between the before and after groups on the test wards minus the difference between before and after groups in the control wards. We use multivariate linear regression to estimate and formally test the statistical significance of the newsletter drop based on these group comparisons. In this way, we can rule out any alternative explanations and be fairly confident that any observed effect can be attributed to the newsletter.

Measures

We analyse the effect of the newsletter on the following set of dependent variables.

Confidence in local area policing

We use the standard BCS measure of confidence in local area policing. Respondents are asked to indicate on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 = 'very poor' to 5 = 'excellent' how good a job do you think the police are doing in their local area. This question reflects an 'overall' public confidence that police forces are now expected to influence in a positive way.

We also drill down deeper into public opinions of the police. Previous work on the PAS and other data has suggested that opinions about the level of police engagement with the public, the fairness of the police when dealing with people and police effectiveness are strongly related yet distinct components of trust and confidence (Bradford et al. 2008; 2009). For the present study, it is particularly important to analyse these components separately. The newsletter was designed to convey how the local police team engages with the local community and successfully deals with the concerns raised by local people. It is thus part of the research question to test whether informing the public is a way of engaging with the public; whether such communication can change perceptions of the way the police treat people (despite the indirectness of the newsletter medium); and whether the provision of information can influence perceptions of how effective the police are in actually protecting the public and fighting crime.

The survey measures the three components of trust and confidence in the police (engagement, fairness and effectiveness) with several items. A short description of the items is given below; the original survey questions are provided in the Appendix. Based

on a set of items for each component, we estimate a separate one-factor model for the three components using maximum likelihood estimation and, based on the factor loadings, calculate factor scores via the Bartlett method of regression.

Police community engagement

The score is based on four items. Respondents rated on a five-point scale to what extent they feel the police listen to the concerns of the local people, understand the issues that affect the community, are dealing with things that matter to the community and, finally, can be relied upon to be there when you need them.

Police fairness

Using the same five-point agreement scale, respondents rated the extent to which they felt that: the police treat everyone fairly regardless of who they are; would treat the respondent with respect if they had contact with them for any reason; are friendly and approachable; and are helpful.

Police effectiveness

Respondents rated how well the police were doing in tackling gun crime, supporting victims and witnesses, policing major events in London, tackling dangerous driving and responding to emergencies promptly.

Two further measures were also included in the analysis. The first (feeling informed) was used to double-check that the newsletter drop actually had some impact on respondents' awareness of the local police. The second (police contact) was used as a control in the regression analyses. Although the quasi-random experimental design means that control variables are not strictly necessary (since the random sampling means that contact experiences with the police should be spread evenly through the before and after groups), including satisfaction with police face-to-face encounters in the models allows direct comparison of these two different forms of 'contact' (see results section below).

Feeling informed

Respondents were asked how well they feel informed about what the police are doing locally. Responses were dichotomized by collapsing the response options 'fairly well' and 'very well' into one category and keeping the third option, 'not at all informed', as the baseline category.

Police contact

In the regression analysis, we control for recent contact with police. Respondents who report having had police contact within the last 12 months are asked to evaluate their satisfaction with the most recent contact on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 = 'completely satisfied' to 7 = 'completely dissatisfied'. For the analysis, we collapse the response categories into 0 = 'no contact', 1 = 'satisfactory contact' and 2 = 'unsatisfactory contact'.

The linear regression models predicting the newsletter effect on each of these dependent variables are simple. The only explanatory variables in the model are a dummy variable controlling for all systematic differences between test and control wards prior to the newsletter dropping and the key variables of interest, namely dummy variables estimating the difference between before and after groups on the test and the control wards, respectively. The quasi-random allocation of respondents to the before and after groups effectively breaks the link between the two dummy variables and all potentially confounding variables. This means it is not necessary to control for any further variables in the model (such as socio-demographics or victimization) to obtain a valid, unconfounded estimate of the newsletter effect.

Results

Before the leaflet drop, 38 per cent of the respondents on test and control wards felt informed about what the police are doing in the local area. After the leaflet drop, this percentage increased to 49 per cent on the test wards, and, as expected, remained unchanged (at 37 per cent) on the control wards where no leaflets have been distributed. This finding provides evidence that key elements of our experiment worked: there is an immediate effect of the leaflet drop on how informed respondents feel about local policing on the test wards, and there is no statistically significant difference in comparison to and within the control group.

Table 2 reports the mean levels of confidence, perceived police community engagement, effectiveness and fairness in the control and test wards before and after the leaflet drop, and the p-values of the t-tests. Prior to the leaflet drop, respondents on test wards reported, on average, significantly lower levels of confidence and had significantly less favourable views of police community engagement and police fairness than respondents on the control wards. After the leaflet drop, public perceptions of

Table 2   Mean levels of confidence, perceived police community engagement effectiveness and fairness before and after the intervention

Means	Test wards		Control wards	
	Before	After	Before	After
Confidence	3.126	3.294	3.412	3.353
Police community engagement	−0.233	0.061	0.041	0.057
Police effectiveness	0.217	0.076	0.118	−0.299
Police fairness	−0.113	0.016	0.080	−0.016
P-values	Confidence	Engagement	Effectiveness	Fairness
Within test wards: before vs after	0.002	<0.001	0.051	0.073
With control wards: before vs after	0.183	0.786	<0.001	0.105
Before: test vs control wards	<0.001	<0.001	0.172	0.006
After: test vs control wards	0.198	0.941	<0.001	0.601

High scores = more favourable options. Total sample size = 2,830. Unweighted data.

Confidence min. = 1, max. = 5, range = 5, mean = 3.12, SD = 0.89.

Engagement min. = −3.20, max. = 1.93, range = 5.12, mean = 0.00, SD = 1.05.

Effectiveness min. = −3.07, max. = 2.22, range = 5.29, mean = 0.00, SD = 1.07.

Fairness min. = −4.13, max. = 1.88, range = 6.01, mean = 0.00, SD = 1.09.

Source: London Metropolitan Police Safer Neighbourhoods Survey 2008.

policing were no longer significantly less favourable on the test wards, and perceived police effectiveness significantly higher on the test than on the control wards. This simple comparison of means suggests a significant positive effect of the newsletter on all four measures of public perception of policing. The four regression models reported in Table 3 estimate this effect of the leaflet drop on the four measures, controlling for the all initial differences between the test and the control wards.

As outlined above, the leaflet reported on what local police had done to find out about the priorities and needs of the local community, the activities they carried out to address local problems and what was achieved. The size and statistical significance of the regression coefficients suggest the leaflet was effective in communicating engagement with local concerns. On the test wards, perceptions of community engagement improved substantively after the leaflet drop. This improvement is likely to be a direct response to the leaflet, since no such statistically significant change occurred on the control wards where no leaflets were disseminated.

Based on this study design, we cannot tell whether this effect is attributable to the contents of the leaflet, the very act of disseminating it or whether a combination of both communicated engagement to the respondents so effectively. The leaflet dissemination may in itself be perceived as an act of showing the police as accountable to the public and are telling people proactively what they are doing locally and why. Disentangling the effects of the literal content from the act of communication itself would require a comparison of the leaflet effect observed here to that of a leaflet that did not indicate police engagement with local concerns, such as one designed to 'educate' the public about crime rates or crime prevention instead. This was beyond the scope of the study described here.

After the day of the leaflet drop, the effectiveness of the police in fulfilling their key roles was perceived significantly less favourably in both test and control wards. But this change was significantly greater in the control wards where no leaflets were disseminated. To understand how the leaflet may have affected people's perceptions of policing, it is important to know what public debate on London policing was happening at the same time as the leaflet was delivered. Because of the quasi-randomization, we did not expect to observe any statistically significant effect in the control wards unless something happened around the day of the leaflet drop. To investigate this, we conducted an analysis of all newspaper articles mentioning the Metropolitan Police anywhere in the text published in 11 major newspapers on the day of or shortly after the leaflet drop, 10 June 2008.[1] Two topics featured prominently in these articles: accusations of racism within the Metropolitan Police organization, in particular against the then Commissioner Sir Ian Blair (mentioned in 46 articles), and the rise of knife crimes and fatal stabbings amongst teenage gang members in London (mentioned in 35 articles) dominated the headlines. Although other explanations can not be excluded, the intense media coverage of these events provides a plausible explanation of the significantly less favourable views of the police effectiveness in performing their job. The police may have appeared less

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[1] The analysis included all 294 newspaper articles containing the words 'Metropolitan Police' published between 8 June and 10 July in the following newspapers: Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday (49 articles), News International Newspapers Information Services Ltd (10 articles), The Daily Telegraph (39 articles), The London Evening Standard (68 articles), The Express Newspapers (2 articles), The Guardian (32 articles), The Independent (23 articles), The Mirror and The Sunday Mirror (14 articles), The Observer (6 articles), The Sunday Express (4 articles), and The Times and The Sunday Times (47 articles).

Table 3   Linear regression model predicting scores for overall confidence, perceptions of police effectiveness, fairness and engagement

Dependent variable:	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Engagement	Effectiveness	Fairness	Confidence
	Coeff. (95% C.I.)	Coeff. (95% C.I.)	Coeff. (95% C.I.)	Coeff. (95% C.I.)
Explanatory variables				
Within test wards				
After the intervention (ref.: before)	0.219** (0.09; 0.35)	–0.184** (–0.32; –0.05)	0.0629 (–0.07; 0.19)	0.118* (0.02; 0.22)
Within control wards				
After the intervention (ref.: before)	0.013 (–0.10; 0.13)	–0.415*** (–0.53; –0.30)	–0.088 (–0.20; 0.03)	–0.055 (–0.14; 0.03)
Police contact (ref.: no contact)				
– Satisfactory contact	0.010 (–0.10; 0.12)	–0.042 (–0.16; 0.07)	0.095 (-0.02; 0.21)	0.043 (–0.04; 0.13)
– Unsatisfactory contact	–1.290*** (–1.46; –1.11)	–0.887*** (–1.07; –0.70)	–1.190*** (–1.37; –1.01)	–0.971*** (–1.11; –0.83)
Initial ward difference				
Control ward (ref.: test ward)	0.211** (0.08; 0.34)	–0.138* (–0.27; 0.00)	0.131* (0.00; 0.26)	0.235*** (0.14; 0.33)
Constant	–0.098	0.311***	–0.008	3.220***
Adjusted R^2	8.0%	7.4%	9.4%	7.4%

High scores = more favourable opinions. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$. Total sample size = 2,830. Unweighted data.

effective in stopping a spate of killings among teenagers, whilst they were simultaneously viewed as unable to keep their 'house in order' and indulging in 'petty' organizational in-fighting.

Against this backdrop, the significantly smaller decline in opinions about effectiveness in the test wards suggests that the leaflet might have had a 'buffering effect' against the messages respondents were receiving from the media. The reports on community engagement and successful local area policing contained in the leaflet appear to have compensated (at least in part) for the negative effect of a media focus on current events. Clearly, the positive effect of the leaflet on perceptions of engagement and effectiveness must be understood as a multiplier effect of actual engagement and actual police activity carried out in the ward. Communication is effective in as much as it accompanies, but not substitutes, action.

Perceptions of police fairness, politeness and helpfulness in personal encounters were least affected by current events and not apparently affected by the leaflet communication. We observed no statistically significant effect on the test wards following the leaflet drop, and neither was there evidence of coinciding events having had an impact. On the face of it, this appears to be because this is the 'component' of confidence most likely to be influenced by personal (or vicarious) experience—precisely what the newsletter cannot offer (and note the large negative effect of personal contact on perceptions of fairness). Returning to the impact of current events on perceptions, the coinciding events did not appear to have a statistically significant effect on perceptions of police fairness (despite the amount of publicity given to the alleged racism inside the organization) or engagement.

In summary, there is strong evidence that the leaflet drop had a substantial positive effect on perceptions of engagement and a buffering effect on respondents' belief in police effectiveness when it was challenged by current events; however, the leaflet had no measurable effect on tacit expectations of police fairness, decency and helpfulness in personal encounters. Each of three components of confidence was affected differently (or in the case of fairness, not at all) by the leaflet drop and the events that coincided with it. For these Londoners at least, opinions of the police really are multi-faceted (Bradford et al. 2008; 2009) and some aspects appear to be more open to influence and challenge than others.

The media analysis and the observed significant worsening in perceptions of police effectiveness on the control wards provide evidence for the presence and impact of events coinciding with the newsletter dissemination. These findings raise the question as to whether the impact of coinciding events constitutes a threat to the validity of our conclusions. In this regard, the quasi-randomized design of the experiment is a strong guard against erroneously interpreting the impact of coinciding events or confounding factors as an effect of the newsletters. If changes in opinion arose from other events, or an interaction between these events and the reception of the newsletter, these events would need to have occurred in or have affected the test wards only, and not the control wards. Since both control and test wards are spread across London, this seems rather unlikely. The evidence that it did affect opinions is very strong.

It is theoretically possible that the observed effect of the newsletter is the product of an interaction between the newsletter and other developments, such as those outlined in the section on concurrent media stories above. If this was the case, two conclusions

would necessarily follow. The first is that the newsletter must have a non-zero effect so as to produce the significant effect observed on the test wards. If the unique effect of the newsletter net other developments was zero, any hypothesized interaction effect that involved it would also be zero. Given the joint effect of coinciding events as measured on the control sites is negative, the second implication is that the effect of the newsletter must not only be non-zero, but must be positive and interact with the coinciding events in some way that reverses an initially negative effect into a positive effect as to produce the observed positive overall effect. In sum, neither the presence of other developments nor the possibility of them interacting with the newsletter changes the conclusion that the newsletter had a positive effect on perceptions of policing.

The final question is to address whether the newsletter had an effect on overall confidence in the police. The results suggest that while the events at the time of the leaflet drop did not have a statistically significant effect on confidence (evidenced in the absence of a significant change on the control wards), the newsletter did have a significant effect on overall confidence. The increase in overall confidence following this one-off leaflet drop is considerable and parallels the improved perceptions of community engagement.

The analysis of the leaflet drop experiment also yields a noteworthy finding in relation to the effect of different forms of police encounters (or communication) on confidence. The regression analyses (Table 3) show that recent unsatisfactory contact with officers has a sizeable negative effect on respondents' perception of police fairness, effectiveness, engagement and respondents' overall confidence in the police. This finding is not particularly ground-breaking in itself; it is the reliably replicated outcome of virtually all empirical studies of encounters with the police (Skogan 2006; Walker et al. 2009; Bradford et al. 2009). But it is interesting in light of the effect of the leaflet drop. Whilst the face-to-face encounters experienced by relatively few members of the public have overall strongly negative impacts on confidence (although positive encounters can have a positive effect, this is usually dwarfed by the much larger negative impact of negative experiences—Skogan 2006), indirect, impersonal encounters via direct communication to the wider public appear to be confidence-enhancing.

It seems, then, that personal and impersonal encounters differ in how much and in which direction they can influence confidence. The public do appear to be receptive to positive messages about police engagement and effectiveness via direct communication, although the size of the confidence-enhancing impact of this impersonal encounter is smaller than the impact of personal encounters. The findings may also indicate that that the messages people receive via newsletters of the tailored type described here differ from, and are potentially inconsistent with, those people receive during personal encounters with officers. At the very least, it may be much easier to communicate positive messages via written, thought-through communications than in the situations that typically bring about face-to-face encounters. This is a hypothesis to be explored in the future, since it goes beyond what can be gleaned from these data.

Discussion

From a police policy perspective, the experiment described here was a resounding success. It demonstrated that overall confidence, as well as public opinion about police community engagement and effectiveness could be influenced in a positive manner by

the use of leaflets targeted towards sharing local people's priorities and demonstrating police responses to them. In terms of our original research questions only the third, addressing the potential impact of the newsletter on opinion of police fairness, could not be answered in the positive. As noted above, this is probably not surprising, since this is the component of confidence that appears to be most strongly related to personal or vicarious experience, rather than assessments of police performance made in other ways.

Current police performance—as measured by the single overarching indicator of 'public confidence'—taps into the views of the whole population and not just those who come into direct contact with the police. 'Improving' general public opinion may appear to be an unattainable goal to some inside, and indeed outside, the police service. In particular, there seems to be a common notion that any police communication effort is dwarfed or even nullified by the allegedly paramount influence of the media that fuels fear of crime and undermines public confidence in the police. Notwithstanding this, the newsletter experiment described here demonstrates that it is possible for police to communicate effectively with many people in local areas and foster more positive attitudes about policing among them.

The most important finding was perhaps that the newsletter had a significant impact on views about police community engagement, namely assessments of the extent to which police recognize, understand and act on the public's priorities, which can also be seen as opinions concerning whether police share the values and priorities of those they police (on which local issues should be addressed, for example). Assessments of the extent to which local police engage with the community have been shown to be the most important aspect of 'overall' trust and confidence (Jackson and Bradford in press; Stanko and Bradford 2009). The correspondence in the test wards between change in the community engagement and overall confidence measures appears to reaffirm this idea: impressions of effectiveness fell, and ideas about fairness where unchanged, but overall confidence increased in a very similar way to ratings of engagement. This finding underlines that while the effectiveness of the police is clearly an important element of its overall performance, and in the trust judgments of the public, when people are asked 'how good a job' their local police are doing, they place most emphasis on their assessment of the extent to which police listen, understand and act on their concerns.

Direct written communication may then constitute an important way in which police can communicate shared values. Lay assessments of the extent to which institutions share and express the values most important to the public are held to be central to the legitimacy granted to them (Beetham 1991). A key factor informing the idea that authorities such as the police should be deferred to and obeyed is a sense that those authorities hold to and by a shared ethical and moral framework. But how do people 'know' that the values of the police are aligned with their own? The experience of fair and decent treatment during interactions with officers is one way in which shared values can be inferred and, indeed, demonstrated (Tyler 1990; 2006; Tyler and Huo 2002). On the basis of this experimental evidence, it appears that another is police communication that demonstrates an awareness of what issues are important and, crucially, action on those issues. It does not seem too strong a claim, then, to infer that direct written communication of the type described here is then a way in which the police can enhance, or at least re-affirm, its legitimacy.

Although opinions of police effectiveness fell in the test wards, that they fell by less than in the control wards suggests that the leaflet also seems to have communicated a

certain sense of police competence: the ability to 'do the job' that is also a key element of both legitimacy and trust. Although, as noted, we cannot be sure people actually read the leaflets provided to them, the buffering effect on opinions in the test wards can at least provisionally be attributed to the information in the leaflets concerning what the police actually did about the problems local people had identified. Further, a certain overlap between engagement and effectiveness is also implied. Acting on public concerns—rather than simply listening to them—may be an important way in which police communicate community engagement. Such linkages serve as a reminder that while 'components' of trust, such as those labelled here engagement and effectiveness, may be distinct constructs, they are also interrelated, and positive (or negative) perceptions across them are likely to often be mutually reinforcing.

By contrast, the experiment described here threw up an intriguing finding concerning the relationship between views about police fairness and community engagement. These are clearly conceptually distinct constructs in both subjective and objective terms. It is possible for an individual to believe the police are fair but not engaged with the community, while, in contrast, certain ways of being engaged with the community, such as if one section wants particular action taken against another, could certainly lead to unfairness. However, previous work has found that, empirically, public opinions about police fairness and community engagement are so highly correlated as to make them almost inseparable (Jackson and Bradford in press; Stanko and Bradford 2009). When people (in London at least) think about how fair the police are, they do so in ways very strongly related to their assessment of its relationship to their local community. But the data presented here show that public opinions about police fairness and engagement reacted differently to an external stimulus—the newsletter. This suggests that while highly correlated, these are indeed two distinct constructs in empirical as well as conceptual terms, and that they should continue to be treated as such wherever possible.

Conclusions

It must be recognized that police activities of the type described here contain ethical and moral pitfalls. There is the possibility that the public may be misled, whether accidently or purposefully, about the nature and achievements of policing. There is an inherent risk that successes will be exaggerated and, in particular, that failures will be elided. On the other hand, the need of the police to show active engagement with and responses to local people's priorities may shade over into a much more negative 'taking of sides', such as if police appear to, or do, favour one party over another in neighbourhood disputes, or if specific groups are singled out as having had action taken against them without a balancing recognition of what needs to be done for them. Neighbourhoods, especially in London, are not homogenous. Perceptions of what constitutes a problem in the local area can be diverse and decisions on police priorities controversial. One only needs to think about the response of many people to issues such as 'teenagers hanging around', and of what they would like police to do about this 'problem', to see how addressing such priorities, and informing the local community about it, might satisfy some in the local area but at the same time alienate others.

However, theses dilemmas are embedded in the very activity of policing and not unique to the type of communication discussed here (Manning 1997). In so far as

everyday policing finds ways to address such issues, this should also be possible in the much more restricted realm of written communication. More broadly, if communication between police is premised on the importance of transparency, truthfulness, sincerity and veracity (Habermas 1979), it should be possible to avoid the dangers of manipulating public opinion or positioning police as partial or as having taken sides in an unwarranted fashion. An obvious precondition for the newsletter to meet these criteria is that local police teams actually engage with the public: finding out and understanding their concerns, and doing something about them. In order to be credible, the newsletter cannot just pay lip service to modern 'community' policing methods, but needs to be reflective of the actual concerns, needs and experiences of the local public.

We close with a note of caution. For all that it appeared to have substantial effects, the newsletter in this quasi-experiment constitutes a 'weak' treatment. Most notably, it was a one-off event, and interviews were held within a few weeks of people receiving the leaflet. We can be fairly confident that the observed improvements were 'real' at the time respondents had been interviewed, because the quasi-experimental set-up is a strong guard against erroneously attributing the observed improvements to the leaflet when in fact they were due to something else. However, at present, we do not have the data to track how long the leaflet effect persisted.[2] It is possible that after a short-lived 'boost', opinions fell back to their initial 'baseline' level. Public notions of the police may be based on deeply held structures of feeling and orientations and thus relatively immune to major short-term change (Loader and Mulcahy 2003; Smith 2007; Reiner 2000). However, communications between police and public of the type discussed here should not be envisaged as one-off campaigns and occasional events. Rather, they should be components of a much wider and ongoing conversation through which the police continually ask people about their priorities, respond in appropriate ways and communicate back to the public—things that, after all, should be at the very heart of policing in a modern democracy.

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[2] The SNS survey was repeated in 2009 in the same seven wards, which should allow some consideration of any long-term differences between control and experimental wards.

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