The Effects of a Performance Indicator Culture on Strategic Decision Making within the Police

Kath Twemlow
PhD Student
Institute for Social Research, University of Salford

Introduction

I am a second year PhD student based in the Institute for Social Research at Salford University. The title of my research is, ‘Research and Strategic Decision Making within a North-West Constabulary’. I am jointly funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the North-West Constabulary on which the research is based.

This paper will comment upon the effects that the Performance Indicator system has on strategic decision making within the police. The paper is divided into three main sections which are;

1. Background information about my research including methodology.
2. Brief history of performance indicators within the police.
3. Case study evidence on the effects of the performance indicator system on strategic decision making within the police.

Section 1. Background information on the research including methodology:

The research being undertaken for my PhD is primarily concerned with the relationship between external corporate consultation and strategic decision making. I am using four case studies of external consultation to address this relationship:

- Public Perception Survey from 1999/2000. This survey is carried out every two years by the Management Information Unit within the Constabulary. It is quite unique as it was the only survey at that time which collated the opinions and views of the general public of the force boundary area.
- Household Burglary Survey from 1999/2000. This survey is an annual survey, distributed to victims of household burglary who are therefore customers of the police service and hold views on their performance from a first hand perspective.
- Division 1’s Crime and Disorder Audit from 1998. 1998 saw the first wave of Crime and Disorder Audits to be undertaken. This specific division was chosen out of a possible six divisions as it has Unitary status.
- Division 2’s Crime and Disorder Audit from 1998. This division was chosen as it is different to the above division as the council does not have unitary status there exists both the County Council and the District Council.

The research question can be divided into two main parts these are:

1) How much notice is actually paid to the results of external consultation by top decision makers within the organisation?

2) To what extent are those decision-makers able to make such evidence based policy decisions?

To answer the research question I am using ethnographic research methods. This has been made possible as I have been given an excellent access to the organisation. For example I have my own employee’s identification card, log on details to the in-house network and my own e-mail address within the police force. This has aided me greatly in the organisation of interviews with top decision-makers within the police and has also allowed me to attend official managerial meetings.

The ethnographic methods being utilised are those of two years participant observation, a total of thirty-five semi-structured, tape-recorded interviews and field notes from approximately twenty official managerial meetings. I am still at the data collection
phase of my research and therefore have not made any definitive evaluations from my findings.

During the first year of the PhD, most of my time was spent carrying out relevant literature searches and familiarising myself with the subject area. This process pointed me mostly towards the topic of accountability and public participation in local policing. I was aware of the performance indicator system but did not think that it was directly relevant to my research.

As my research has progressed it has become apparent that it would be almost impossible for me to comment upon strategic decision making within the police without considering the performance indicator system. Many respondents while being interviewed have themselves raised the topic of performance indicators although I had initiated a discussion on external consultation. This in itself speaks volumes about the significance the performance indicators have upon strategic decision making within the police. During the final part of my paper, I will use some of my own research findings from the interviews, which I have conducted so far, to highlight the importance that the performance indicators have upon policing especially related to strategic or policy decisions.

I will now attempt to give a very brief history of performance indicators within the police.

Section 2. A brief history of performance indicators within the police.

The Local Government Act 1992 gave the Audit Commission the responsibility to develop and gather performance indicators for the police and local authorities. The year 1993/1994 was the first year that they were collected. There were at that time 23 performance indicators being used by the Constabulary. For the year 2001/2002 there are 52 Best Value Performance Indicators now being measured by the government. There is however an aim to reduce the overall number of indicators for the next year to a more manageable figure.

It is very difficult to explain the exact number of performance indicators for one organisation as often under one title there is more than one figure to be collected. For example Best Value Performance Indicator number 28, is actually measuring three different figures which are those of the percentage of police officers in operational posts, percentage of police officers in support posts and percentage of police officers in organisational support posts. This could be made simpler if it were recorded as for example Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI) number 28 a, b and c.

The Management Information Unit within the police force co-ordinates the collection of the figures for the BVPIs. The indicators are described as,

‘The measure of a best value authority’s performance in an existing function’. (DETR. Best Value Performance Indicators 2001/2002.)

They are ways in which performance can be measured, which allows both comparison between forces and over time within an organisation. Where possible the Constabulary has set targets for the performance indicators. It was statutory to set targets against the figures for the following crimes:

- Household Burglary
- Vehicle Crime.

The targets were set locally using top quartile figures from all forces performance figures from the past two years of reviews.

The use of performance indicators to compare performance across forces is not an extremely popular method of measurement within the police service due to inconsistencies in data collection and recording. During an interview for the April 2000 edition of Constabulary the following question was put to the then Home Secretary Jack Straw,

Chief constables still seem concerned about the system of performance indicators, do you have any plans to improve it?

He replied,

You can always argue about the conditions of performance indicators but I always come back to my experience in education. I know people complained about targets in schools but overall the introduction of performance target indicators, the transparency of our performance in schools, has helped to raise standards. I am aware that there
may be arguments about particular indicators but overall the idea that each of us should be answerable for our performance is a very good one. (Jack Straw. April 2000. Constabulary. P10.)

That was a very brief history of the performance indicator system within the police, the next section will provide some case study evidence of the effects of the performance indicator system on strategic decision making within the Constabulary.

Section 3. Case study evidence on the effects of the performance indicator system on strategic decision making within the police.

There are four key themes, which are all very closely related, emerging from the data surrounding the topic of Performance Indicators within the Constabulary.

1. Performance Indicators: The largest factor considered in strategic decision making.
2. Performance Indicators first, new innovative initiatives second.
3. Measuring directly relates to prioritising resources.
4. Too many Performance Indicators?

Performance Indicators: The largest factor considered in strategic decision making.

Evidence exists from the research findings that a number of senior police officers within the Constabulary consider the performance indicator system to be the largest factor considered in strategic decision making. The extract overleaf is from an interview with a Detective Chief Inspector on the topic of a Crime and Disorder Partnership, which demonstrates this view.

Resp .... I would say the principle deciding factor I think in deciding the allocation of resources for strategic purposes are the government targets.

Inter The performance indicators?

Resp I would say that they far outweigh any other imperative because they are the things that the local division gets judged on when we have quarterly inspections and an ACC turns up here for the quarterly inspection, he’s not interested in how we are performing against the community safety strategy or against ideas that came out of the crime audit, he’s interested in how we’re performing against the performance indicators that the government has set.

Performance Indicator first, new innovative initiative second.

Placing this much emphasis upon the performance, against certain performance indicators, may not help tackle crime as effectively as for example emphasising the issues raised out of the crime audit mentioned in the above quote. The crime audit, which is an audit which exists due to the Crime and Disorder Act, actually collects data from the public within a partnership area and assists in generating area based crime reduction strategies. There seems to be a great deal of good area based initiatives and programmes occurring as a direct result of the crime audit or partnership work. It also has to be said that partnership work of this nature, in some areas (one of the case study areas being one of them) actually ran partnership work before the act came about and the infrastructure existed in a much less formal manner. However the initiatives emerging out of the partnerships maybe do not run a lengthy or effective course as the performance indicators take over in prioritising resources. During the interview with the same Detective Chief Inspector, this issue was highlighted.

Resp Having said all that is within the confines of you can do all of this stuff but first and foremost you have to look at the performance indicator. The best example I can think of here is drugs. They have had some very good partnership working here in drugs involving lots and lots of other agencies in drug operations where police have some sort of enforcing capability but then that is supported by the housing who issue the eviction
notices to the people who are dealing... The only problem was we weren’t hitting the PI. And when I first took over here it was like we are doing all this impressive work which was good stuff but we are not hitting the PI.

Inter It’s a performance indicator culture?

Resp That’s right. And they are not getting their 3.8 prisoners per month for dealing heroin... So we can have all this nice decision making and we can try and tailor things to suit the locality but first and foremost we have got to hit the PI.

Measuring directly relates to prioritising resources.

Another important theme, which is emerging from the data collection in regards to performance indicators, is that the choice of what is measured and how this is done is crucial to policing. The police have limited resources, which results in prioritising different areas of policing with respect to measurables. The extract below hopefully illustrates this point.

When asked if the household burglary survey would be carried out by the police if it was not a statutory duty to measure satisfaction levels, a police officer at Inspector rank replied,

Resp I think you’ve hit the nail on the head there, because there are expectations it’s a case of well one of the phrases that’s flying around at the moment I’m sure you’ve come across it is. You only do what’s measured or you do first what’s measured and that’s the case in the police service, it’s the case in education, health etc... it’s performance management driven.

Too many Performance Indicators?

When a Detective Inspector was interviewed about the Household Burglary Survey he commented on the number of performance indicators as being too high.

Resp Right, certainly performance indicators and this is a totally personal view, performance indicators, there are far too many for the police. There are in excess of fifty...

Inter It’s sixty odd I think, yes...

Resp A lot of those are to do with crime which is where I’m involved with. They are particularly tough targets to meet and I think that’s not just with our police but shared with other forces as well and certainly here is one of the safest places to live, work and visit as the cliché goes....I see that there are too many for the police, it’s a public service under stress and I just think that there are too many to be honest.

Conclusion

Observational and recorded interview data collected throughout the research, demonstrates that although the performance indicators appear to consume a large amount of police time and resources, they are a crucial tool to aid accountability and they help police forces set useful benchmarks concerning performance.

During an interview with a Detective Inspector, he summarised the benefits of the performance indicators from a policing perspective.

Resp What I would say the benefits of PI’s are, that it clearly dictates and emphasises where resources should be put from the government right down. Where if you have delegated responsibilities down to ground level, it depends upon peoples, senior officer’s perceptions
where as if you have performance indicators and performance targets to meet then those are quite clear.

This paper aims to extend the debate surrounding the need for balance in respect to prioritising and allocating resources within the police against the backdrop of performance indicators, public consultation and the understanding of local needs and concerns.

References

Constabulary. April 2000.


Correspondence

Kath Twemlow
Institute for Social Research
Humphrey Booth House
University of Salford
k.twemlow@pgr.salford.ac.uk