

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 public trust and confidence in the police has moved to the centre of policing policy in England and Wales. This has raised important questions about how police should go about influencing public opinion. 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 officers? The provision of direct written communication is one way in which police can inform the general public about their activities with, potentially, confidence enhancing effects.

This paper presents the findings from a natural quasi-randomised experiment on a large, representative sample of people (aged 16 and over) living in seven London wards carried out on behalf of the Metropolitan Police Service in Spring 2008. The experiment assessed the impact of a leaflet drop on public perceptions of policing. The design included a test group of three wards that received a newsletter (disseminated on the same day halfway through the fieldwork) and a control group of four wards that did not receive a newsletter. Within both groups of wards respondents were randomly split into a before (the newsletter dissemination) and after group.

The newsletter dissemination was therefore the 'intervention' or treatment in the quasi-randomised experiment. Each ward received a newsletter tailored to their local area, which reported what the local police team had done to find out about the concerns of local people, attempted to demonstrate that the police understand the issues raised by local people, and finally reported the action the police had taken in response to these problems and how successful this had been.

Since respondents were randomly allocated interview dates within the survey period, the day of the newsletter drop divided the sample into two (random) halves, effectively controlling for all differences – other than the newsletter drop – between the

respondents interviewed before and after the day of the 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 drop.

The control wards allowed potentially confounding effect from events coinciding with the newsletter dropping (such as local or national media reports concerning the police) to be measured and controlled for. To investigate this possibility we carried out a media analysis of all articles mentioning the Metropolitan Police in 11 major newspapers on the day of or shortly after the leaflet drop. Two coinciding events that might have confounded or interacted with the newsletter drop were identified: accusations of racism within the Metropolitan Police organization and the rise of knife crimes and fatal stabbings amongst teenagers in London.

Results suggest that the newsletters used in the experiment significantly improved public opinions of the police. There was 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 a decline in public assessments of police effectiveness. A significant decline in perceptions of effectiveness was observed in the control wards, very possibly because of the adverse media coverage at the time, but this did not occur in the test wards.

The findings of this paper support the idea that public trust and confidence can be enhanced by direct written communication. Effective and meaningful communication, in whatever form, is an important element of the formative processes that underpin legitimacy, trust and confidence in the police.

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