

Assaults on police – culture, legitimacy and risk

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Long read: Research on the risk and impact of violence against police officers

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Introduction

When I became a police officer in 2010, one of the earliest lessons my tutor taught to me was about being ready for the first time I would be assaulted. For my tutor, assaults were an inevitable ‘part of the job’.

When I started working on my thesis in 2011, I wanted to consider key trends around assaults against police officers. As the study progressed, my focus moved towards analysing interactions between suspects and victims, cultural responses to assault, and the reaction to – and internalisation of – assaults by officers. The thesis focused on what the data tells us around assaults, the impact of the role of the police, the occupational police culture and police legitimacy. The work identified a gap in the academic literature related to violence against police officers, certainly in the UK context, and sought to reflect on this risk.

Literature review

Despite assaults being a key concern for police officers and staff, the focus of academic literature and the media has often been on the police use of force. Lack of focus on assaults was keenly demonstrated in the mid-2010s, when data on assaults had to be directly requested from the Home Office, as it was not widely published and was often incomplete. Failure to collect data was reflected in the figures, which recorded only 4,730 assaults against officers in 2013-14.

In 2021-22, in the context of a more detailed political and policing focus on assaults, around 41,000 assaults were recorded against officers in the UK. The number of assaults has been on an upwards trend, potentially indicating a greater risk to police officers from violence, but also better recording and reporting of assaults. This has been supported by recent legislation, including the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018 and the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022.

One key challenge in understanding the breadth of assaults is the definitions used. Legally, the introduction of the offence of 'assault of an emergency worker' removed the phrase 'in the execution of duty', which framed the offence of assaulting a constable. Instead, the focus is now on the performance of the role of emergency worker at the time of the incident.

Aside from legal definitions, the concept of assault is also framed individually by officers, potentially dependent on experience or learning in the role. Officers may make decisions to arrest for assault based on the intention of the suspect, the nature of the assault, any injuries caused or factors such as the perceived capacity of the assailant. The opinions of other officers could also influence police decision-making, as could the perceived way in which the courts would respond to the incident. Each of these factors can affect decision making and can change how officers define an assault.

Findings from academic studies identified several themes relating to assaults. Research by Brown (1994) and by Christopher and Noaks (1990) found a connection between alcohol and the night-time economy, with a heightened chance of assaults around 11pm and midnight. Other studies identified risks associated with attendance at domestic incidents (for example, Rabe-Hemp and Schuck, 2007). These risks included entering private spaces and being unaware of escape routes or hidden risks, such as position of potential weapons, making decisions to remove people from properties and entering situations where substances such as alcohol are mixed with violence. In the night-time economy, domestic incidents or other violent occurrences, existing frustrations or aggression can become focused on police officers who intervene to enforce lawful powers and protect the public.

Other studies have demonstrated the risk of assault in custody (Deehan and others, 2002). Custody acts as the final barrier from point of arrest to placing into a cell. It can be an opportunity for one last act of defiance and resistance when being searched, booked in or taken to a cell.

The context of risk

My study focused on three key themes, which emerged from the literature and contextualised assaults and violence.

Firstly, Bittner (1975) suggested that a police officer's role is to deal with something that should not be happening, and that someone should be doing something about. Police officers have the unique

ability to use force in efforts to de-escalate conflict and tensions, restore order and enforce the law. Reiner argues that where there is a necessity to exercise authority over the public and enforce lawful powers, police officers act in the 'shadow of the law' (1991). This potentially places them in direct conflict with citizens, leading to the escalation of aggressive non-compliance.

Secondly, Tyler (2006) explored the concept of procedural justice, arguing that the policing function could only operate when the actions of officers were seen as legitimate. If police officers did not offer people the chance to explain, or were perceived to not be fairly applying the law, then there was a risk of assault. Tyler (2006) states that people want an explanation for police action if they are to accept the application of control and follow orders. Acting without explanation could therefore lead to an aggressive and resistant response.

Thirdly, the occupational police culture is a long-debated theme in policing (Skolnick, 1966; Reiner, 2000; Waddington, 1999), underpinning cultural adaptations and values that informally guide police behaviour through the passing of generational experience via parade room talk. These traits include a desire for action, machismo and solidarity, and allow police officers to make sense of their role (Skolnick, 1966; Reiner, 2000). These cultural values and traits may, to some extent, guide how police officers interact with the public and how they respond to being assaulted. It is suggested that as officers leave training and enter the policing world, they become socialised to a rulebook of behaviours. However, the extent to which they adhere to them may depend on several factors, including role, rank and experience.

Methodology

The research began with a review of the assault data from Lincolnshire, recorded from 2011 to 2015. Participant observation forms were designed using the data trends. Working as a police officer for the duration of the study gave me privileged access to observe incidents of assault and aggressive non-compliance. Observations took place over a period of one year and totalled 50 incidents from three towns, which allowed for the identification of themes related to contexts and factors.

Towards the end of participant observation, I conducted 11 interviews with police officers, one of which was a pilot interview using a schedule that was then changed for the final interviews. The interviews required officers to reflect on assaults and related themes, including the assessment of

risk and the decision to arrest for an assault. The study used an overt methodology, where all officers were aware of it taking place and could remove their consent. Having experience of being an officer allowed me access to direct observational methods, following ethical approval.

Results and discussion

Some of the key results emerging from the thesis included the following.

- Assaults occur throughout the policing process, from initial attendance to police custody, with some additional risks seen at the point of arrest and detention, immediately following arrest and in custody.
- The definition of an assault is subjective, with some officers reflecting on the intention of the suspect, the seriousness of the offence and the meaning of the uniform. In context, officers have different thresholds around engagement and facing aggression and resistance from suspects.
- The method of assault tends to show risk when people are being directly controlled but are resistant to police action. Data shows a higher level of kicking, spitting, biting and punching as the main methods of assault. There have also been some identifiable trends that reflect societal changes. For example, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an increase in the use of coughing as a method of assault.
- There are not always significant trends in the data, with assaults occurring in every month of the year. However, there are sometimes noticeable increases in the summer months and around key events, such as Halloween, Christmas and the New Year.
- Streets, dwellings and custody remain the areas where the risk of officers being assaulted is highest, especially when moving people from the location of arrest to a police vehicle.
- The proportion of victimisation in terms of male or female officers does not seem relevant. For example, in Lincolnshire, the difference was often around 70% assaults on male officers to 30% on female officers, which reflects the proportion of male and female officers in the force.
- According to initial data from a recent follow-on study, assaults tend to occur in areas of higher deprivation and where there are hotspots of other offending, such as violence and drugs offences. There also appears to be a higher proportion of female suspects who assault officers when compared with proportions of female offenders arrested for other violence offences.

Through creating a renewed focus on assaults, developing policies on support and encouraging confidence in reporting assaults and violence, police forces are now in a much better position to understand the true level of assaults and the national data to reflect the true risk towards police officers. There are still some instances where officers may choose not to record an assault, which include the following.

- Where mental health powers have been used and the suspect is deemed to be too ill to prosecute.
- The age of the offender, where the suspect is deemed to be too old or too young.
- Where the officer feels that they may be burdening their colleagues if they were to make an arrest.
- Associated paperwork and administration when the assault is deemed as being lower-level.

The role of the police has an impact on the risk of assault, with officers entering violent situations and applying lawful powers and orders over people who may disagree or challenge these actions.

One of the key points emerging from the research was the occupational cultural traits that influenced assaults and officer response to assaults. These factors included the following.

- A desire for action among some officers, which drew on reverence to those who attended the most high-risk incidents and were involved in policing public order incidents in the night-time economy.
- A 'them and us' status, which guided how some officers sought to establish control during incidents and approached some incidents.
- Machismo-guided officer reaction, which was often dictated by not emotionally responding to assaults and risk, and by demonstrating toughness in front of colleagues.

While this article has focused on the context of assaults in police forces in England and Wales, the experience of violence is not unique to these forces. Although this study was conducted in one force, the data and conclusions appear to be replicated in the ongoing data collection, in national discussions and across European forces. At a recent conference with European police forces, the nature of the problem of assaults and police force response focused on the same issues on police culture, response to assaults and public confidence in policing.

Recommendations

In my initial thesis, I proposed nine recommendations for policing. As time has progressed, some of these remain current but others have been updated. The main recommendation should be that police forces and the criminal justice system continue to make this a priority and aim to achieve the following objectives, which have formed the basis for our local policy and the wider policies of Operation Hampshire and The National Police Wellbeing Service.

- Gather and analyse data across police forces to identify key trends and themes, which develop a better understanding of assaults and a valid record of the number of assaults against officers and staff. Maintain centralised lessons learned, which reflect on the circumstances of assaults and allow input into training to protect officers.
- Ensure that all officers and staff who are assaulted have access to support from their force and the wider policing family.
- Work closely with other criminal justice agencies (such as the Crown Prosecution Service and the courts) to ensure the right outcomes following incidents of assault.
- Reflect on the reporting of assaults and outcomes. With the work being conducted nationally around assaults, forces need to ensure that all officers and staff are aware of reporting assaults and available support. Consistent outcomes on assaults should develop, followed by a reduction in their overall number.

The role of the police is ever-changing. With new challenges comes the requirement for training and awareness, including a focus on the impact of mental ill health and neurodiversity. Police forces could adopt reflective learning around assertion of control and use of force to prevent future assaults, by looking and reflecting on factors such as risk, experience and their approach to potential incidents of violence.

Assaults against police officers and staff remain an unfortunate risk but should never be accepted as 'part of the job'. It is not written into police conditions that officers should expect to be assaulted. Police forces should work to reduce the frequency of assaults, and to improve protection and support following being harmed on duty.

- This article was peer reviewed by Sergeant Nicola Macgregor, Northumbria Police

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