

Digitalisation of evidence use in police encounters

Project examining how the digitalisation of evidence use shapes conflict before, during and after police-public encounters.

Key details

Lead institution	P-ACE LAB (University of Leicester, Aston University and University of Birmingham)
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Police region	West Midlands
Level of research	PhD
Project start date	September 2024
Date due for completion	September 2028

Research context

This project is interested in how police navigate a complex mix of information (evidence) when conducting their everyday practices and in their interactions with the public. Digitalisation has redefined what evidence means and how evidence is used. Police are increasingly adopting digital tools such as AI as a form of evidence in their practice.

This complexity has the potential to shape conflict in and around police encounters with citizens in many ways. Yet, conflict has previously been understood in narrow terms, as hostility between police and the public. A public administration lens helps us to see conflict as having many forms, meanings and experiences across different actors, contexts and times. Conflict can also reflect the

difficult pressures facing police while also being opportunities for collaboration and learning.

This project studies different moments of police encounters – what happens before, during and after in terms of how evidence is used (cases 1, 2 and 3 respectively).

- Case 1 examines how evidence is brought together and used before deployment of officers.
- Case 2 examines what happens during deployments in terms of how evidence is used in police-public encounters.
- Case 3 examines what happens after by studying how officers use evidence to make sense of their encounters. Case 3 also collects data from online forums where public users make sense of their encounters.

Based on this, the following research questions are proposed:

- In an age of 'digital policing', how is evidence used before, during and after police encounters with citizens? When do police encounters really begin and end?
- When and how does conflict emerge in the use of evidence in police encounters? What kinds of conflict emerge and why?
- What challenges do police face in how they navigate evidence in their encounters? How might studying their practices highlight these challenges and potential solutions?

Research methodology

Data collection

The project uses Cook and Wagenaar's (2012) practice framework to capture and integrate evidence use and conflict in police encounters. This is applied using ethnomethodology, an ethnographic approach focused on organisational practice.

Non-participant observation will be used by shadowing officers in cases 1 and 2. Written field notes will be used along with qualitative, open-ended 'go-along' interviews. Photographs of the site of study may also be taken. This will be accompanied by sketches made by the researcher. These will later be developed, at the same time as photographs, into paintings intended to creatively capture moments of encounters while protecting participant anonymity. The researcher has skills in painting and so this will be an important part of the data collection and presentation.

For case 3, the researcher may observe how officers use digital tools and other forms of evidence to make sense of their encounters. Data will also be collected through a Google search of 'police encounters' which is then filtered to 'forums'. The specific search terms used will relate to the types of encounters observed in case 2. Forums will be assessed and selected based on their suitability for analysis, how representative forum samples are, and whether they contain sufficient data (or 'postings') to conduct meaningful analysis. Forums will be publicly available and do not require permission to access.

Data analysis

Grounded theory will be used to analyse the data generated across all three cases. This will involve moving between the data and theory using initial and focused coding, followed by memo-writing. Memos will be used to dismantle data and codes, compare them across the three cases and check for salient themes. They will then be developed into higher-level theorisations that explain the data and answer the research questions.

Research participation

Police staff from participating forces are likely to be participants in all three cases. Case 2 may also include members of the public who police staff engage with in their encounters. Case 3 will also include public users on online forums such as Reddit or Quora. Public users in case 3 are completely anonymous as they will not be known to the researcher.

References

Cook SDN and Wagenaar H. (2012). [Navigating the eternally unfolding present: Toward an epistemology of practice](#), The American Review of Public Administration, volume 42, issue 1, pages 3 to 38.