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What is policing?

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learning objectives

More than three decades ago, the American sociologist, Egon Bittner (1974: 17) observed that the police service was one of the 'best known but least understood' of public institutions. The numerous studies and accounts that have emerged in the intervening period might mean that the police service is today even better known, although perhaps still less well understood. Crime and policing, including allegations of malpractice and corruption as well as heroism and selflessness, continue to feature heavily in the press, and the TV schedules and cinema programmes are replete with cop shows. Familiarity, however, should not be confused with understanding, and this chapter aims to do the following:

- to outline different perspectives on what 'policing' is;
- to give an overview of what the police service does;
- to distinguish between the relatively narrow activities associated with the institution of the police service from broader social processes of policing in broader terms.

key terms

bureaucracy; crime control; information work; law enforcement; national identity; police and policing; service role; sovereignty; use of force

introduction

In Britain, perhaps more than most countries, the police service forms part of the historical landscape and the police officer is elevated to the status of national symbol and is a ubiquitous part of the cultural framework (McLaughlin, 2007a). Colls (2002) showed how rhetoric surrounding the law, and its application to all without fear or favour, played an important role in the very development of the British state throughout much of the Middle Ages. Clearly, the law has often not been cast or applied in the interests of the whole population, but mythological accounts can be powerful narratives that shape national identity. Loader (1997: 2) suggested that the police are 'a principal means by which English society tells stories about itself … an interpretive lens through which people make sense or, and give order to, their world'.

police and policing

Before attempting to answer the question 'What is policing?' a few points of clarification need to be made. Most important is the need to distinguish

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between the narrow set of functions performed by the institution of the police service and the broader processes of social regulation and reproduction that govern everyday lives. The wider account of policing as a social function stresses that many institutions that do not have any formal role in the regulation of social life in practice contribute to the development of social norms and standards of behaviour that underpin the ordinary social interaction of everyday activity. The word 'policing' is etymologically related to 'politics', the governance of the city or state, and was used in broad terms to signify social regulation in the widest sense. Box 1.1 outlines the development of the term. 'Policing' did not come to be associated with the particular activities of a specific institution (*the* police) until relatively recently in many societies. The historical development of the police in Britain is described in the next chapter, which shows that demand for a particular organization to police society emerged in Britain during the eighteenth century.

Box 1.1

The changing meaning of 'policing'

The Greek *politeia* meant all matters affecting the survival and well-being of the state (*polis*). The word and the idea were developed by the Romans (the Latin *politia* can be translated as the state), largely disappeared with their Empire, but were resurrected in the medieval universities to justify the authority of a prince over his territories. By the early eighteenth century in continental Europe *la police* and *die Politzei* were being used in the sense of the internal administration, welfare, protection, and surveillance of a territory. The word 'police' was not popular in England as it smacked of absolutism … but the word was increasingly used towards the end of the eighteenth century. (Emsley, 1996: 3)

Schools provide a good example of the broader process of social regulation as they play a central role in the socialization of young people by preparing them for adult life. This is not the primary function of the education system, of course, but recent debates about the development of the study of citizenship within schools indicates that preparing young people for their post-school lives is increasingly recognized as an important secondary role. For these reasons it is readily apparent that the education system plays a central role in the policing of society, if that is conceived in terms of the broad process of social regulation. Many other agencies also contribute to this process in ways that are less obvious: religious groups, health providers, and the business sector – to take three examples – contribute in various ways to the organization of social life and so could be regarded as part of the process of policing. Some might argue

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that the media plays a central role in shaping subjective interpretations of the world and the place of the individual within it and so are important agents of policing in this wider sense. In Chapter 8 the increasing range of institutions engaged in police networks are considered in more detail.

The difficulty in thinking about policing in these broad terms is that it becomes difficult to know where the category can be closed. It might be important to recognize that policing is not just the business of the formal police service and that other institutions play a crucial role in developing, for example, public perceptions of criminal or deviant behaviour, but the same could be said for almost any and every aspect of social life. For this reason, much of this book will focus on the narrow approach to policing and concentrate primarily on the activities of the police service and so this initial discussion of 'What is policing?' is also cast relatively narrow. Other agencies, both in the private and the public sector, play an increasingly important role in the business of policing and, where relevant, these are included in the discussion and analysis in chapters that follow. Since the police service cannot be understood in isolation from broader social developments the wider dynamics of policing are crucial to many of the topics featured throughout the book. For the purposes of understanding 'What is policing?', however, it is to the narrower role of the police service that the analysis now turns.

Even a narrow focus on the institution of the police raises the dilemma of how to answer the question, and two perspectives are taken here. This chapter addresses the question literally by exploring what it is that the police do. Chapter 2 explores the question in historical terms by charting the myriad factors that led to the establishment of the modern police service in the nineteenth century.

what is policing?

Attempts to define policing have focused upon the range of different aspects of the diverse roles that the service performs. Chapter 2 provides an alternative approach by considering the historical development of the police service in Britain. In this section various other perspectives are discussed. First, a traditional 'common-sense' definition of police work – that it is primarily a matter of law enforcement – is considered. Although this approach does not account for the many other aspects of police work that do not, directly or indirectly, relate to crime control and law enforcement, it has the advantage of providing a relatively clear concise definition. Other perspectives that seek to reflect the wider activities performed by the police are then considered. One approach has been to define the police service in terms of its recourse to the **use of force**, and the power of the police service over ordinary citizens. Certainly, the police service exerts a coercive power over citizens not available to many other

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agencies. However, approaches based on the centrality of force to policing need to account for the recourse that other institutions have to physical force. But these other institutions might still prove coercive in terms of exerting power over the lives of citizens. Moreover, studies suggest that a characteristic of police work is to under-enforce the law and to use persuasion and negotiation rather then physical force, although the potential to do so remains.

Another approach to understanding policing focuses on the routine functions performed by officers. These perspectives tend to note the breadth and diversity of tasks that the police perform, many of which are characterized by a broader public service ethos not related to crime control. In contrast to the law enforcement model, this has the advantage of reflecting the realities of police work, but tends to result in definitions that are so broad that they lack focus. Another approach that tends to suggest that law enforcement is only part of the police role characterizes the bureaucratic and administrative responsibilities of officers. The gathering, interrogation and communication of intelligence relating to crime, disorder and **antisocial behaviour** have, it is argued, become the defining characteristic of police work. A final perspective is an institutional one that relates to the role of the police service in terms of the broader functions of the criminal justice system.

Each of these approaches to understanding policing is explored in greater detail in the discussion below. These are separated into different categories in an effort to illustrate different ways of considering policing. It is not suggested that any one of them ought to be chosen at the expense of the others.

a narrow, law enforcement approach

In November 2005, the **Commissioner** of the Metropolitan Police delivered the annual BBC Dimbleby Lecture, and suggested that increasing social diversity, debates about moral relativism, and social fragmentation meant that policing could no longer be left to the police to decide on their own (Blair, 2005). The time had come, Sir Ian Blair rather portentously argued, for the public to decide what kind of police service that it wanted. Quite how the public – divided and confused as Sir Ian portrayed them – would be able to establish a coherent set of priorities that the police could address was not explained. During a period in which concerns about terrorism, apparent increases in violent gun crime, protests about animal rights and fox hunting, the strict enforcement of speed restrictions on the roads, the safety of police officers, drug use, police racism, debate about the extent of free speech, and many related topics have been at the forefront of popular debate, it might seem appropriate to have a period of considered reflection about the nature of policing and how it might be properly developed in difficult times. As McLaughlin (2007a) noted, however, much of the press response to Sir Ian's bid for

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dialogue was characterized by two, related, reactions. First, media commentators poured scorn on the Commissioner, claiming that his invitation amounted to a tacit admission that he did not know what the role of the police was. Blair was portrayed as a liberal intellectual – more concerned with political correctness than police work – who was so out of touch that he no longer even knew what the service was for. Second, the newspapers gave a simple and relatively narrow definition of what the police service is for: catching criminals. The *Daily Telegraph* (2005), for example, told Sir Ian in no uncertain terms '"What kind of police service do we want?" The answer is obvious: one that better protects us from crime.'

Clearly political, policy and popular cultural understanding of the police are often centred on their crime-fighting role. Although the following discussion will demonstrate that policing is about much more than crime fighting, it is not surprising that the news media suggest otherwise, given that it is this that features so heavily in all types of media coverage. Both fictional and factual representations of crime and policing tend to focus disproportionately on violent offending and the police response to it. Media coverage of policing is significant since many people get information about crime trends, and the response to it, indirectly through newspapers and television, and because mediated images influence debate about future directions for the police service and the 'state of the nation' more generally (Mawby, 2003a). Clearly generalizing about the media coverage of the police, as though this were a coherent or univocal phenomenon, is unhelpful and it should be remembered that ideas about crime and insecurity are communicated in complex and unpredictable ways (Innes, 2004; Lee, 2007). Nonetheless, media coverage of policing often focuses upon the crime-fighting work that officers do. TV shows may give a false impression of the nature and extent of crime for reasons of narrative and drama. These considerations also influence media representations in documentary programmes and 'infotainment' shows that purport to represent the 'reality' of police work, but nonetheless give a selective and partial account. Reiner (2003: 269) noted that the police are subject to occasional negative media coverage and the exposure of police deviance has been a recurring theme. On balance, though, he argued that:

> **The overall picture of crime and control presented in the media, whether fiction or news, is thus highly favourable to the police image. Crime is represented as a serious threat to vulnerable individual victims, but one that the police routinely tackle successfully because of their prowess and heroism. The police accordingly appear as the seldom-failing guardians of the public in general, essential bulwarks of the social order. (ibid.)**

Media coverage of the police, clearly, is disproportionately focused on their law enforcement duties. As Mawby (2003a) noted, research suggests that media accounts are the authoritative narrative of policing for large sections of the public. In his Dimbleby Lecture, Sir Ian Blair (2005) wryly remarked that 'Lots

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of people in this country are actually undertaking a permanent NVQ [National Vocational Qualification] in policing – it's called *The Bill*.'

If these representations are important in terms of public attitudes, it seems equally likely that they have implications for those who work for the police – and for new recruits – who might find themselves working in an environment radically different from that which they had been encouraged by the media to expect. What is also important is that popular cultural representations offer a wholly unrealistic conception of policing. The crime-fighting mandate does provide one answer to the question 'What is policing?'. This might be a somewhat narrow conceptualization of policing, but clearly apprehending offenders and preventing crime are central elements of police activity. Even this narrow perspective of police work, though, raises important questions. The range of acts that contravene the criminal law is huge and diverse. The 1996 Police Act, for example, outlaws the act of 'causing disaffection among police officers'; the Malicious Damages Act of 1861 outlaws the placing of wooden obstacles on railway tracks; the 1985 Companies Act makes 'failing to keep accounting records open to inspection' a criminal offence. Box 1.2 outlines some of the circumstances defined as criminal by the 1351 Treason Act.

Box 1.2

The 1351 Treason Act

[W]hen a man doth compass or imagine the death of our Lord the King, or of our lady his Queen, or of their eldest son and heir; or if a man do violate the King's companion, or the King's eldest daughter unmarried, or the wife of the King's eldest son and heir; or if a man do levy war against our lord the King in his realm, or be adherent to the King's enemies in his realm, giving them aid and comfort in the realm, or elsewhere and thereof be provably attainted of open deed by the people of their condition … and if a man slea the chancellor, treasurer or the King's justices … assigned to hear and determine being in their places doing their offices.

That legal prohibitions on various activities are introduced or repealed over time is one reason why a crime-centred definition of policing needs to be adopted with caution. Furthermore, the breach of certain criminal laws, including most of those examples cited above, may never feature in the work of most police officers. The 'black letter' of the criminal law provides only a very weak indication of what police officers actually do: this is partly because individual officers operate with considerable **discretion** but also a result of the principle of operational independence, which means that Chief Constables are able to exercise their **discretion** in terms of establishing which criminal activities will be prioritized. Not only does the differential enforcement of the law

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mean that police activity cannot simply be read from statute, it also provides the conceptual space that criminological analysis seeks to fill by exploring the circumstances in which individual officers and the police service collectively enforce certain laws but not others. At various stages in this book the differential enforcement of the law is considered. The significance of officer **discretion** is discussed in Chapter 5 where the broader topic of police occupational subculture and its impact on police work is considered. Chapter 7 explores why hate crimes, such as racist violence, have tended to be under-policed. Chapter 9 considers the extent to which the surveillance and law-enforcement powers of the police have been expanded by CCTV and similar technologies.

In the early 1990s, when the British police service was being reviewed by a Royal Commission on Criminal Justice, the Sheehy Inquiry into Police Responsibilies, and the Home Secretary published a White Paper on police reform, and an independent committee of inquiry into the role and the responsibilities of the police was established by the Police Foundation and the Policy Studies Institute (Cassels, 1996). The issues that had led to such fervent debate about the police service in the early 1990s continue to dominate twenty-first-century thinking: changing crime problems, expenditure on policing, increasing public insecurity, and the growth of the private security industry (ibid.). Before considering these issues in detail, the inquiry considered the role of the police and endorsed the definition of policing contained in the Statement of Common Purpose and Values, namely, that:

> **The purpose of the police service is to uphold the law fairly and firmly; to prevent crime; to pursue and bring to justice those who break the law; to keep the Queen's peace; to protect, help and reassure the community; and to be seen to do this with integrity, common sense and sound judgement.**

This definition of police work is broadly consistent with other influential statements made since modern police services were established in the nineteenth century. The relative unanimity on the role of the police service, though, cannot disguise the enormous complexities and contradictions contained within them. As the Cassel's Inquiry noted, agencies other than the police are responsible for achieving some of these goals, and there may be contradictions between some of them, such as enforcing the law and maintaining public order, and priorities need to be established within this broad framework. Definitions of the police role become contradictory once an exclusive focus upon law enforcement is left behind.

the centrality of 'force' to policing

Other efforts to define the police and the policing role more widely have focused upon the police monopoly in the legitimate **use of force**. If the police

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embody the state, then Max Weber's classic definition of state sovereignty as the possession of a legitimate **use of force** over a given territory is clearly an important feature of the police role. Bittner (1974) and Klockars (1985) have argued that it is the ability to use force against their fellow citizens that is the defining characteristic of the police officer. Like definitions that focus upon law enforcement, the emphasis on police **use of force** reveals important properties of police work but, similarly, are subject to important caveats that muddy the waters. First, research evidence makes it very clear that police officers tend to under-utilize their capacity to use force to resolve conflict. Although there are clearly occasions when the police **use of force** is properly subject to legal, political and media scrutiny – perhaps the best recent example was the furore surrounding the shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes at Stockwell Park Tube station in the aftermath of the July 2005 terrorist attacks in London – negotiation and persuasion characterize most police–public interaction. In part, the doctrine of the use of minimum force has been an important component of securing police legitimacy (Reiner, 2000). Moreover, the police service finds that its monopoly status – never absolute in any case – is increasingly being eroded as other agencies are afforded recourse to the **use of force**. Other state employees, such as customs officers and environmental health officers, also have legal powers to detain people and impound property. Additionally, quasi-public agencies, such as bailiffs employed by the courts, also have powers to enter property and can use force in a limited way in order to do so.

the practice of policing

Attempts to identify the role of the police reviewed thus far have been based on abstract, normative considerations of what the principles of the police ought to be. Another, more rigorous examination of what the police service does can be gleaned from various research studies that have explored the realities of routine police work and found that service-oriented work and order maintenance – a much more nebulous concept than crime control – characterize much of what officers do. Among the first accounts of police work was Bittner's (1974) review of policing studies, including that of Reiss (1971) and Niederhoffer (1969), in the US that led him to the view that 'when one looks at what policemen actually do, one finds that criminal law enforcement is something that most of them do with the frequency located somewhere between virtually never and very rarely' (Bittner, 1974: 22). Earlier Banton's (1964: 2) study of the British police led him to the view that 'the police are relatively unimportant in the enforcement of law'. More time was spent performing a wide range of public service roles, Bittner suggested, that had little in common except that there was no other agency that might be expected

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to perform the function. Although not greatly helpful to those seeking to understand what policing actually is, Bittner's (1974: 30) observation amply illustrates the breadth of the police task: 'no human problem exists, or is imaginable, about which it could be said with finality that this certainly could not become the proper business of the police'.

The service roles performed by the police are widely noted in studies of routine police work. Much traffic policing, for example, is directed towards keeping roads clear so that vehicles keep moving and public safety is enhanced. This might involve some law enforcement activity but, as with other areas of police work, it has been widely established that officers tend to underenforce the law and to use other strategies – most obviously negotiation – in order to ensure public co-operation. Bayley's (1994) study of routine police work in Australia, Canada, England and Wales, Japan, and the United States suggested that patrol work accounts for most of what officers spend their time doing, and that most of this is directed – especially in urban areas – by dispatchers who in turn are responding to calls for help from the general public. Bayley (ibid.: 30) estimated that no more than 7–10 per cent of such calls relate to crime, and even that small proportion includes much that is of a non-serious nature. Against this background, much routine policing is about patrol work, such that officers might be understood as 'tour guides in the museum of human frailty' whose role is

> **[to] 'sort out' situations by listening patiently to endless stories about fancied slights, old grievances, new insults, mismatched expectations, infidelity, dishonesty and abuse. They hear all about the petty, mundane, tedious, hapless, sordid details of individual lives. Patient listening and gentle counselling are undoubtedly what patrol officers do most of the time. (ibid.: 31–2)**

While it might be that officers spend much of their time performing roles that appear to have little or nothing to do with crime fighting, the distinction between law enforcement and crime control models of policing is not as clear-cut as it might appear at first. Bittner (1974) presented an imaginary traffic police officer to illustrate the complex priorities that might make the general **service role** a priority over crime control in some circumstances, as the extract in Box 1.3 demonstrates. Popular representations of police work might present a narrow range of crime fighting activity as typical of policing but the apparently peripheral service work might have broader implications for community relations and law enforcement. A BBC documentary that explored the contemporary nature of British policing was told, by the director of the Police Foundation, of an officer who responded to an elderly lady who requested assistance in opening a tin of cat food (BBC, 2006a). Clearly this illustration is only one remove from the cliché of emergency services rescuing cats from trees, and has as little to do with crime control as can be imagined. Nonetheless, the

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Foundation's director pointed to the value of such a service as it provides assurance to the person who receives it, and helps to shore up the legitimacy of the service. It also provides further illustration of the challenge of arriving at a clear and concise definition of the police function.

Box 1.3

The competing priorities facing Bittner's traffic cop

One of the most common experiences of urban life is the sight of a patrolman directing traffic at a busy street intersection. This service is quite expensive and the assignment is generally disliked among policemen. Nevertheless it is provided on a regular basis … Despite its seriousness and presumed necessity, despite the fact that assignments are planned ahead and specifically funded, no assignment to a traffic control post is ever presumed to be absolutely fixed … no matter how important the post might be, it is always possible for something else to come up than can distract the patrolman's attention and cause him to suspend attending to the assigned task … It is virtually certain that any normally competent patrolman would abandon the traffic post to which he was assigned without hesitation and without regard for the state of the traffic he was supposed to monitor, if it came to his attention that a crime was being committed somewhere at a distance not too far for him to reach in time either to arrest the crime in its course, or to arrest its perpetrator … But if the crime that came to the attention of the officer had been something like a conspiracy by a board of directors of a commercial concern to issue stock with the intention of defrauding investors, or a landlord criminally extorting payments from a tenant, or a used-car dealer culpably turning back an odometer on an automobile he was preparing for sale, the patrolman would scarcely lift his gaze, let alone move into action. The real reason why the patrolman moved out was not the fact that what was taking place was a crime in general terms, but because the particular crime was a member of a class of problems *the treatment of which will not abide*. In fact, the patrolman who unhesitatingly left his post to pursue an assailant would have left his post with just as little hesitation to pull a drowning person out of the water, to prevent someone from jumping off the roof of a building, to protect a severely disoriented person from harm, to save people in a burning structure, to disperse a crowd hampering the rescue mission of an ambulance, to take steps to prevent a possible disaster that might result from broken gas lines or water mains, and so on almost endlessly, and entirely without regard to the substantive nature of the problem, as long as it could be said that it involved *something-that-ought-not-to-be-happening-and-about-which-someone-had-better-do-something-now!* (Bittner, 1974; emphasis in original)

There has been considerable oscillation between the twin polices of crime control and service provision in political terms during the past few decades. Some Chief Constables have strongly advocated a community policing model predicated upon the co-provision of services with other agencies and with the

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public more generally (Alderson, 1984) and the development of the police 'Statement of Common Purposes and Values' placed a clear emphasis on the **service role** (Reiner, 2000: 110–11). However, the mid-1990s saw other proposals and reform, such as the Sheehy Inquiry into officer pay and employment conditions, the Posen Inquiry into core and ancillary tasks, and the 1994 Police and Magistrates Court Act, all of which sought to develop the police service along business lines around the core business of catching criminals (Reiner, 2000: 111; Morgan and Newburn, 1997: 44–73). The tension between service provision and crime fighting – two possible answers to the question 'What is policing?' – turns out to be misplaced if policing is understood in terms of order maintenance; a strategic role that encompasses all of the activities alluded to in the discussion so far. Conceptualizing police work in terms of broader processes of social regulation not only helps understand the sheer breadth of activities that the police actually carry out, it also allows for the complementary contributions made to this process by other agencies.

police as bureaucrats

If policing is to be understood on the basis of the various tasks and functions that officers perform, then a fundamental reassessment of the role is required in the light of the amount of administration that officers do. Although studies of police work often show that officers engage in risky pursuits of offenders and confront danger, these are exceptional events for most officers, although the potential for such encounters might mean that they shape officer perceptions of people and situations (Reiner, 2000). The routines of police work are characterized by administrative and procedural work which might not be understood as 'real' policing by police sub-culture or media representation, but are centrally important in terms of the proportion of time devoted to them. The administrative burden on police officers is often cited as a priority to be tackled by reform programmes and innovative technological solutions that promise to ease the load, and some of these are discussed in Chapter 9. While record-keeping and form-filling are often associated with attempts to micro-manage officer behaviour and hold their managers to account in terms of targets and performance management regimes, the extent of police administration has partly been determined by demands to ensure that powers are discharged fairly, and that legal procedures, for example, relating to the security of evidence, are being adhered to. The background to some of these requirements is outlined in Chapter 3, in which police powers are discussed, and in Chapter 7, where considerations relating to diversity issues are reviewed. Efforts to reduce the administrative burden on police officers have sometimes involved **civilianization** of roles previously fulfilled by officers, and the employment of Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) who can perform ancillary functions and allow police to

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attend to 'frontline' policing tasks. The scope and extent of the pluralization of policing are discussed in Chapter 8.

For whatever reason, though, it is clear that a quantitative answer to the question 'What is policing' might lead to the conclusion that it is an administrative role. Certainly, Ericson and Haggerty's (1997) study of police work in Canada noted the considerable bureaucratic responsibility that officers faced – they identified, for example, that officers attending the scene of a road traffic accident were required to complete a dozen different forms. The extent of this aspect of police work led Ericson and Haggerty to argue that police officers had become 'knowledge workers' whose primary role was to communicate risk within the police service, the criminal justice system and to a host of other agencies. More recently, a Home Office-funded study of policing in Britain also found that officers were required to spend much of their time on activities that kept them away from patrol work (PA Consulting, 2001). The research, based on analysis of diaries completed by officers, concluded that 43 per cent of officer time was spent inside police stations, most of which was either devoted to the custody process, which took an average of 3.5 hours per prisoner, or was spent completing paperwork. Box 1.4 gives an overview of some of the bureaucratic requirements on officers. Notably the report concluded that computer-based methods could alleviate this position and that this ought to be achievable within three years. There is little evidence that the extent of bureaucratic responsibilities has reduced, and the impact of information work on the nature of policing is discussed at greater length in Chapter 9.

Box 1.4

Routine police work?

But what accounts for the time operational officers spend in the police station? The two main culprits are the time taken to process prisoners and prepare prosecutions, and the other paperwork which the police must produce. Arresting someone – no matter whether they are a petty criminal or a serious offender – keeps officers off the beat for an average of 3.5 hours – often for far longer. At busy times there are bottlenecks in custody and frequent delays in carrying out finger-printing, photographing and criminal record checks. Delays are generally the same for a simple shop-lift as for a much more serious matter. Where a solicitor, appropriate adult or interpreter is required, this can trigger a further wait of on average an hour. If CCTV or an identity parade is involved, further substantial delays can ensue.

Other paperwork includes crime reports, intelligence reports, forms to log recovered property, missing person details, information required for special force initiatives as well as paperwork connected with the shift administration and the officer in question. Often one event (e.g. a crime) can trigger the recording of the same information on multiple separate records. Where forms are available electronically, little officer time is actually saved because the IT system applications are mostly antiquated and do not talk to each other. (PA Consulting Group, 2001: vi)

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The distinction between policing and the police has often been overlooked in academic analysis of policing. Although that is changing, as discussion in Chapter 8 indicates, it is less clear that media or political debate about policing has broadened. A narrow response to the question 'What is policing?' retains an institutional approach and regards policing as a key agency within the broader criminal justice system. Figure 1.1 shows the relation between the police service and other parts of the criminal justice system in England and Wales. As will be demonstrated throughout this book, the police service might be the 'state in uniform', the pre-eminent visible embodiment of sovereignty and the rule of law but it is not the only agency influencing and regulating social conflict and cohesion.

For much analysis of the performance, equity and efficiency of the criminal justice system, concern about policing begins and ends with the actions of the public police, which, while only a small component within the complex justice system illustrated in Figure 1.1, plays a crucial role as a 'gateway agency' to the rest of the system. Even though a recurring theme of this chapter and this book is that policing is a process continued beyond the public police, it is clear that little done by other agencies feeds into the criminal justice system without an input from the police service. For this reason alone it might be important to remember that even though 'policing' and 'the police' are no longer synonymous, it continues to be the case that the public institution of the police occupies most attention in wider debates about law enforcement, order maintenance and the almost boundless range of tasks associated with policing.

conclusion

The chapter has addressed the question 'What is policing?' in terms of the underlying principles of the police service and the wide range of roles performed by officers. While policing as a social function is broader than this, the initial focus has been on the public institution of the police service. It was shown that the media and other popular representations that suggest that policing is primarily about crime-fighting are seriously misleading, not least because they underplay the broader order maintenance and service work that officers do. The following chapter considers the history of the police, and the ways in which it has developed. Just as this chapter emphasizes that policing is about much more than the law-enforcement activities of the public police service, so too the discussion in Chapter 2 suggests that policing needs to be understood in broader terms.

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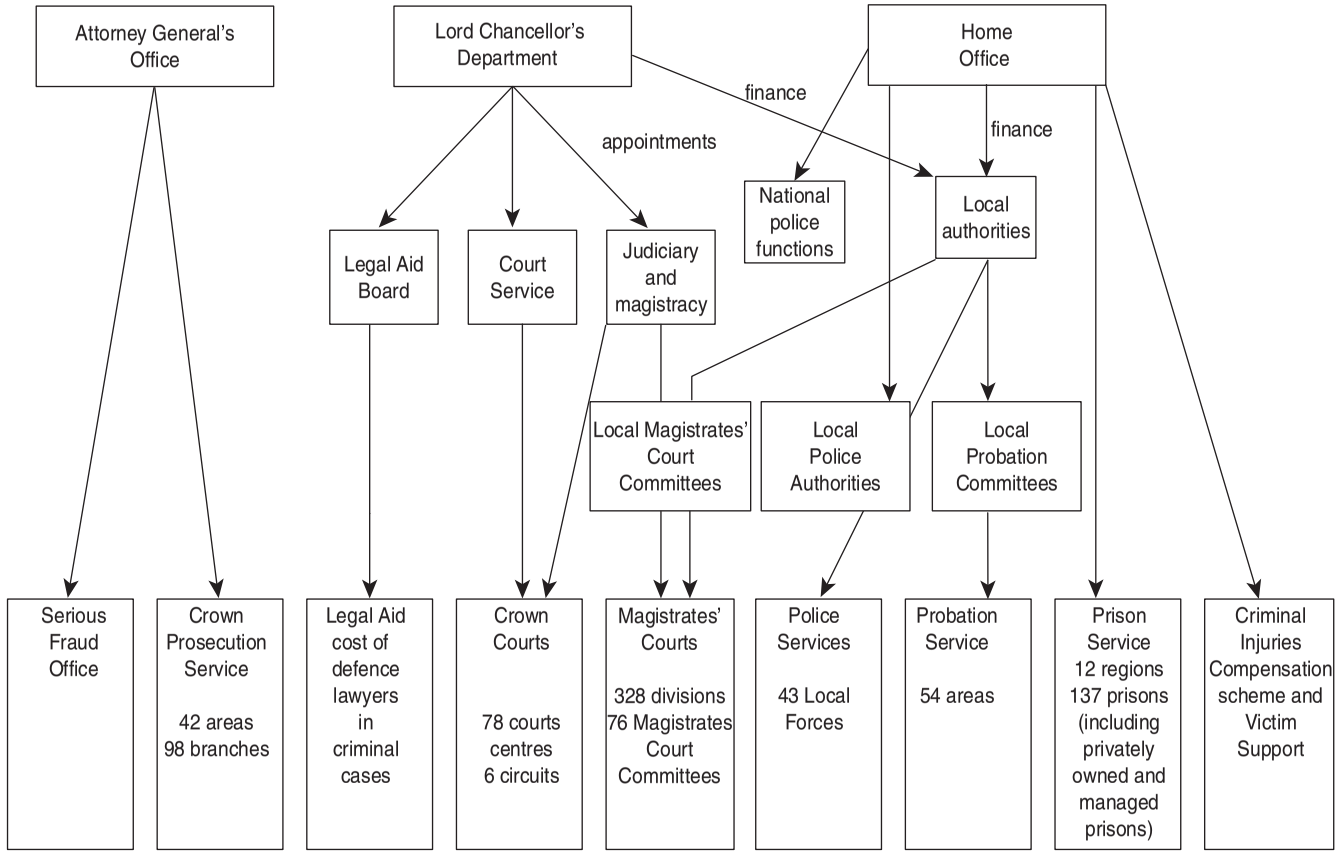

Figure 1.1 The structure of the criminal justice system in England and Wales

Source: Home Office (2000)

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chapter summary

- The police have become a cultural symbol of the British nation. Mythology about the development of the law and policing has been an important element of narratives of national identity.
- Although often treated as synonymous, **police and policing** need to be understood as distinct concepts. Policing relates to broad processes of social regulation that underpin the routines of everyday life, as such, these are performed by a wide range of agencies and institutions. Historically, 'policing' has been understood in these broad terms and not associated with the activities of a particular organization.
- While a broad approach has the advantage of incorporating the wide range of processes that regulate social life, it lacks clarity, since almost anything could be included. A narrower definition, equating policing to the activities of the institution of the police, might lack breadth but it is clearer and a more concise perspective.
- Often policing is understood in terms of law enforcement, and certainly this has been a common perspective in media coverage. Fictional and documentary images of police work tend to centre on crime-fighting, and concentrate on dangerous, action-oriented pursuits and serious crime portraying the police as the 'thin blue line' between social order and chaos.
- The law-enforcement perspective is flawed since police officers use considerable **discretion** when applying the law, and many laws are rarely enforced by most officers. Moreover, police services perform a wide range of activities that do not relate to law enforcement.
- Other definitions focus upon the police monopoly **use of force**. Traditionally state sovereignty has been understood in these terms and considering the police as the 'state in uniform' leads to this definition being transferred to the police service. As with the law enforcement perspective, though, the reality of police work suggests that force tends to be under-used and negotiation characterizes police encounters with the public, although the potential for coercive force might shape these interactions.
- Another perspective is gained from studies that consider the nature of the roles that the police perform in practice. Such studies tend to confirm that law enforcement accounts for only a small proportion of police work, and order maintenance and service functions are more significant in terms of the time and resources allocated to them. Bittner (1974) argued that all these functions had in common was that it was not possible to identify another agency that ought to be responsible for them. Fulfilling these public service roles might enhance legitimacy, secure public confidence, and so contribute to crime control and law enforcement.

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- Research studies have also shown that police officers are required to perform a wide variety of administrative tasks, to the extent that some have characterized policing as a form of 'knowledge work' whereby officers are required to communicate information about risks of crime to a host of other agencies. Bureaucratic aspects of police work have often been regarded as a distraction from the core responsibilities of officers and moves to civilianize police duties and develop technological methods to reduce their burden have been widely pursued.
- Policing can also be understood in institutional terms as the police service forms a key part of the broader criminal justice system. Although much of the order maintenance and service-oriented functions of the police service do not contribute to the criminal justice system more widely, discussion of the efficacy and efficiency of the system more generally tends to relate to the police service, the 'gateway' agency, in some respect.

self-check Questions

1 How can narrow and broader definitions of policing be characterized?

2 What agencies, apart from the police service, play a role in regulating social life?

3 Why did Mawby (2003a) argue that media images of policing are important?

4 Who provided a 'classic' definition of state sovereignty?

5 Why might the '**use of force**' offer only a limited understanding of the police function?

6 In what, very broad, terms did Bittner (1974) define the police task?

7 What proportion of public calls to the police did Bayley find were related to crime?

8 How did Ericson and Haggerty (1997) characterize police officers?

9 What two factors explain, according to research published in 2001, the significant amount of time officers spend in the police station?

10 What relation does the police service have to the criminal justice system more generally?

study Questions

1 What are the difficulties in distinguishing between a narrow and a broad definition of policing?

2 Why does the media tend to present an image of policing so different from that revealed by research studies?

3 What is policing?

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annotated further reading

Bittner's (1974) article 'Florence Nightingale in Pursuit of Willy Sutton' is an early account of the complexities and contradictions inherent in the police function that provides a compelling argument against a narrow 'law-enforcement' definition of the role of the police.

The first chapter of Waddington's (1999) *Policing Citizens* contains a useful discussion of the question that has framed this chapter: 'What is policing?'. Waddington explores the force–service dichotomy and similarities and specificities of police work across the world.

Chapters 3 and 4 of McLaughlin's (2007a) *The New Policing* provide an excellent account of the development of 'police studies', focusing on traditional perspectives (including that of Bittner) that emerged in the US in the 1960s and somewhat later in the UK, and 'new perspectives' that consider the changing terrain of policing in post-modern, post-industrial global society.

annotated listings of links to relevant websites

A good starting point for general information on the roles, responsibilities and development of the police in Scotland is available from the homepage of the Scottish Executive, (http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Justice/Police). Similar information relating to England and Wales can be found at the Home Office website (http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/police/), and at the Northern Ireland Policing Board at (http://www.nipolicingboard.org.uk/).

The full text of Sir Ian Blair's Dimbleby lecture 'What Kind of Police Service Do We Want?' can be found at http://tinyurl.com/2wg8za.

In response to Blair's call for debate on the purpose of the police service, the Police Foundation – an independent charity that seeks to enhance public and policy debate – held a seminar considering 'What the police are for'. Proceedings of the event and much other useful material can be found at http://tinyurl.com/2kpld5.

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