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## Reassuring the public: a review of international policing interventions

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The responsibility of the police to provide 'reassurance' to the public has risen up the policy agenda in recent years. This work reviews several evaluated interventions (projects designed to address aspects of reassurance, such as reducing fear of crime) and assesses how effective different mechanisms for change (e.g., increased foot patrol, community engagement) have been within these interventions. The review concentrated on two aspects of reassurance: 'improving perceived police effectiveness' and 'increasing feelings and perceptions of safety'.

### Key points

- Many of the interventions reviewed were multifaceted, and sought to address more than one aspect of reassurance.
- The most successful interventions for improving perceived police effectiveness used mechanisms designed to improve the visibility and familiarity of police officers. In terms of perceptions of safety, increased foot patrol produced the most positive results.
- Almost all the evaluations of visible and accessible foot patrol strategies have taken place in other countries, mostly the US.
- Physical improvements to an area can have an impact on aspects of reassurance. The police did not usually initiate this type of intervention, suggesting reassurance often requires a multi-agency response.

Despite recent policy interest, reassurance is not a new concept in policing. Bahn (1974) related the concept to feelings of safety and security, created by a local police presence, and also argued that the 'visibility' and 'accessibility' of the police were key to citizen reassurance. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (2001) also emphasised these concepts in their 'Open All Hours' thematic. More recently, the concept has appeared in the National Policing Plan 2003–06 (Home Office, 2002), which identifies greater public reassurance (alongside improved police performance) as 'the primary objective for the police service for the Plan's three year duration'.

This theme was built upon in the 2004–07 Plan, which sets 'providing a citizen focused service to the public, which responds to the needs of individuals and communities, and inspires confidence in the police, particularly amongst minority ethnic communities' as a key priority (Home Office, 2003). This is reflected in the Policing Performance Assessment Framework, which includes Statutory Performance Indicators relating to reassurance. However, despite this adoption of 'reassurance' as a key part of policing, there remains no widely agreed definition of the concept.

Earlier definitions of reassurance (Bahn, 1974 and HMIC, 2001) related mainly to an individual's feelings of safety. Following an initial literature search, a broader definition was adopted for the purposes of a review of international interventions on reassurance in policing:

The intended outcome of actions taken by the police and other agencies to improve perceived police effectiveness (mainly confidence in, and satisfaction with, the police), and to increase feelings and perceptions of safety (including reducing the fear of crime).

The findings from the full report of the review, undertaken by the Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate, are summarised here. The review aimed to:

- define 'public reassurance' in the context of policing by examining the relevant literature
- identify which interventions are more effective and why
- provide contextual information to assist with interpretation of findings.

The research also attempted to identify the knowledge gaps for future research in this area, in order to support ongoing policy development.

**Methodology**

After defining 'reassurance', several databases were searched and around 80 reports were acquired, both from Britain and elsewhere. The literature was then sifted and appraised, and 22 relevant studies were reviewed. These were evaluated interventions which included mechanisms designed to address aspects of reassurance (although none specifically referred to reassurance as a concept).

The studies were appraised using the Maryland Scientific Methods Scale (MSMS). This was devised by criminologists as an evaluation assessment tool that would inform scholars, policymakers, and practitioners of the methodological quality of the evaluation(s) under scrutiny (Farrington et al., 2002). The studies received an overall grading (with 1 the lowest and 5 the highest), based on scoring aspects of the research design. This grade was then used as a tool to assess the success of interventions, in conjunction with their level of impact and the statistical significance of the evaluation results. Intervention mechanisms were then classified according to:

- **what works:** intervention mechanisms that have shown positive, statistically significant results in two or more evaluations with a MSMS score of three or above
- **what doesn't work:** as above but showing negative results
- **what is promising:** intervention mechanisms that have shown positive, statistically significant results in only one evaluation with a MSMS score of three or above.
- **what is unknown:** intervention mechanisms that do not fit into any of the above categories, either because they did not receive a MSMS grade of three or above, or because the results were not statistically significant. Therefore, it is possible that mechanisms in this category may have been classified as promising, had they been implemented in the context of a more methodologically robust intervention or evaluation.

Table 1 gives a synopsis of the results for increasing perceived police effectiveness and improving feelings and perceptions of safety.

**Table 1 Synopsis of results**

Increasing perceived police effectiveness	Improving feelings and perceptions of safety
12 appraised evaluations	22 appraised evaluations
Six gained positive results	Eight gained positive results
Four gained statistically significant positive results and a MSMS grade of three or above	Five gained statistically significant positive results and a MSMS grade of three or above
What works: Improving police visibility and familiarity	What works: Increased foot patrol
What's promising: Community engagement; community policing; increased foot patrol; beat policing	What's promising: Improving police visibility, accessibility and familiarity; community policing; increased residential security
What doesn't work: Not applicable	What doesn't work: Not applicable
What's unknown: Neighbourhood Watch	What's unknown: Street lighting; CCTV; Street drinking restrictions; Neighbourhood Watch; crime prevention; beat policing; community engagement

**Table 2 Successful intervention mechanisms addressing perceived police effectiveness**

Study, country of origin and who initiated the intervention	Intervention mechanism(s)	Results	Quality assessment score
Pate et al. (1986) US (Police)	Visible and familiar patrols Community engagement Community policing	Although these were only three of a number of intervention mechanisms, all showed positive results using either panel data, cross-sectional data or both.	5
Police Foundation (1981) US (Police)	Increased foot patrol (which included increased visibility)	Where foot patrols were added and retained, public opinion improved. The opposite occurred when patrols were dropped.	3
Skogan and Hartnett (1997) US (Police)	Visible patrols	Perceptions of police responsiveness improved in most of the experimental areas. The visibility of officers was also linked to positive views around the quality of police service.	3
Criminal Justice Commission (1995) Australia (Police)	Familiar officers Beat policing	Public confidence in the police rose between 10% and 17% across 4 measures. Furthermore, 94% of people were satisfied with the service given by beat officers, versus 83% in comparison areas.	3

### Increasing perceived police effectiveness

The most successful means of increasing perceived police effectiveness was the improvement of police visibility and familiarity (for all successful mechanisms implemented in interventions with a MSMS score of three or above, see Table 2). In terms of improved visibility, two interventions were particularly successful:

- Police Foundation (1981) used the mechanism of increasing, retaining or decreasing the presence of foot patrol officers. Perceptions of police effectiveness rose in areas where patrols were increased or retained but, as the intervention and evaluation were part of a fixed period experiment, it was not possible to ascertain whether the increases could have been sustained.
- Skogan and Hartnett (1997) evaluated the early years of the Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy (CAPS). This concentrated police officers in small beat areas. They take a problem-solving approach, by working together with residents and community groups in their localities. Police-community interaction is provided in the form of 'Beat meetings' in each locality. The intervention improved public perceptions of officers' responsiveness in four out of five experimental areas. There were mixed effects relating to perceptions of officers' 'demeanour'. The visibility of officers was found to be a factor associated with positive views around the quality of police service.

The most successful visible patrol intervention that specifically emphasised familiarity was Pate et al. (1986). This intervention was multifaceted, and implemented seven mechanisms in two programme areas: Houston, Texas and Newark, New Jersey. Three mechanisms produced positive results: the Citizen Contact Patrol, the Community Organising Response Team and the Co-ordinated Community Policing. The Citizen Contact Patrol involved officers proactively making contact with community members and handing out business cards. It was successful using panel analysis (which reflects a change over time), but not cross-sectional analysis (which studies the views of respondents at one particular time period by using a 'cross-section' or percentage of the population).

The Criminal Justice Commission (1995) evaluation also showed positive findings in relation to familiarity, in that the intervention included police officers having part of their houses as 'mini' police stations. However the results related to the service provided by them generally, as opposed to their accessibility or familiarity.

Perceived police effectiveness was increased in interventions using a number of mechanisms. As well as visible and familiar police officers, community policing, community engagement, beat policing and increased levels of foot patrol were all successful to varying degrees.

**Table 3 Successful intervention mechanisms addressing feelings and perceptions and safety**

Study, country of origin and who initiated the intervention	Intervention mechanism(s)	Results	Quality assessment score
Pate et al. (1986) US (Police)	Visible and familiar patrols Accessibility Community policing	Although these were only three of a number of intervention mechanisms, all showed positive results using either panel data, cross-sectional data or both.	5
Police Foundation (1981) US (Police)	Increased foot patrol	Where foot patrols were added, perceived safety improved. The opposite occurred where patrols were retained or dropped.	3
Trojanowicz (1982) US (Police)	Increased foot patrol	Over two-thirds of respondents felt safer because of the foot patrol programme.	3
Kenney (1987) US (Guardian Angels in conjunction with the researchers)	Increased foot patrol	The presence or absence of Guardian Angels (voluntary, weapon-free, citizen patrols) on subways had little impact on passengers' overall fear. However there was a reduction in fear when the patrols were increased.	3
Allatt (1984) UK (Police)	Improved residential safety	Fear of crime and fear of burglary dropped in the experimental area. The opposite was the case in the comparison area.	3

### Improving feelings and perceptions of safety

In relation to feelings and perceptions of safety, the increase of foot patrols gave the most positive results. Table 3 shows all successful mechanisms implemented in interventions with a MSMS score of three or above. The intervention that showed the greatest impact on feelings of safety was the Neighbourhood Foot Patrol Program in Flint, Michigan (Trojanowicz, 1982). Over two-thirds of respondents stated that they felt safer, and many added that this was especially the case when patrol officers were visible and were familiar to them.

The Police Foundation (1981) evaluation was also successful in improving feelings of safety. When patrols were increased, safety improved. However, in contrast with the previous section on police effectiveness, this was not the case when patrols were retained at normal rates. A US based evaluation involving 'Guardian Angels' (visible patrols of citizen volunteers) was shown to have some positive effects on feelings of safety (Kenney, 1987).

A number of other evaluations were also successful in improving feelings of safety. Pate et al. (1986) used a number of mechanisms, including a 'community-policing' approach; and Allatt (1984) recorded positive effects from an intervention involving increased residential security.

### Discussion and conclusions

A wide variety of mechanisms have been used in interventions designed to address aspects of reassurance. Some have enjoyed more success than others. In terms of increasing perceived police effectiveness, mechanisms that increased the visibility and familiarity of officers were most successful. Community engagement, community policing, beat policing and increased foot patrol were also seen to make an impact, albeit to a lesser extent. Increased foot patrol was clearly the most successful in terms of improving feelings and perceptions of safety, whilst visible and familiar officers, community policing, accessibility of the police, and improved residential security were also mechanisms that showed some success.

Some of the intervention mechanisms that were promising or unknown could have respectively been classified as 'what works' or 'what's promising', had they been implemented in different contexts. It should also be highlighted that the MSMS method of classification favours larger interventions, with experimental evaluation designs.

There are a number of additional points to consider when interpreting the results. Firstly, there is the context in which an intervention is implemented, including political systems, local socio-economic conditions, and the cultural climate. Many of

the successful interventions took place several years ago, and most took place outside the UK. It is possible that contextual factors (that may be absent when seeking to replicate interventions) contributed to the success of some interventions. Some intervention mechanisms may also simply not be transferable to other contexts for practical reasons. For example, all the appraised interventions took place in urban areas, and mechanisms involving visible and familiar foot patrol would be difficult to implement in a rural context.

Some mechanisms are easier to implement than others. For example, physical improvements to an area (such as providing locks on windows and doors) can be a one-off task; introducing a widespread change to policing strategies is far more challenging. Also, many of the appraised interventions were experimental (introducing mechanisms for a specific evaluation period). It is often difficult to assess whether experimental interventions would have achieved

sustained improvements, and indeed whether they would have been possible to sustain. If resources have been reallocated for an intervention (for example, to increase levels of foot patrol), it is important to consider the effect on other areas of policing. It is also difficult to sustain interventions that seek to achieve long term organisational change, irrespective of resources. Community-related policing interventions, for example, can depend heavily on the continued involvement of the original key personnel, or sufficiently trained replacements.

### Recommendations

The provision of public reassurance involves a variety of agencies and people. Table 4 includes a number of recommendations for addressing reassurance. In some instances, the recommendations apply to more than one service delivery area or agency.

**Table 4 Recommendations**

Recommendation	Home Office	Research	Police	CDRP*
Constituent aspects of 'reassurance' should be measured in a rigid and consistent way in future evaluations.		✓		
There should be further work carried out to establish 'acceptable levels' for specified aspects of reassurance. These threshold measures may vary in different intervention contexts.	✓	✓		
Future interventions should consider 'baselining' levels of relevant aspects of reassurance before undertaking evaluations, as this is advantageous when interpreting results.		✓	✓	✓
A 'reassurance toolkit' or something similar should exist on the Crime Reduction website. Building on the current Fear of Crime toolkit could be one way this is achieved.	✓			
Future interventions should consider publicity as an integral part of the project, particularly if the intervention mechanisms are not visible to the public.		✓	✓	✓
The visibility, accessibility and familiarity of police officers should be optimised when introducing new patrol strategies, preferably in smaller and more localised areas where possible.			✓	
When addressing feelings and perceptions of safety, the feasibility of an increase in the number of officers that patrol on foot should be examined.			✓	
Reassurance should be the shared responsibility of the police, Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships, other local stakeholders and community members.	✓		✓	✓
Interventions that have been referred to in the review that currently exist in England and Wales (such as police-community stations) should be evaluated.	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: \* CDRP: Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships.

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For a more detailed report of the review findings see *Reassuring the public: a review of international policing interventions* by David Dalgleish and Andy Myhill (2004). Home Office Research Study No. 284. Copies are available from the Communication Development Unit. It is also available on the Home Office RDS website <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/>

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