



## **UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC VALUE THROUGH POLICING PRIORITIES USING Q-METHODOLOGY**

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July 2017

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

#### **Purpose of the research**

This executive summary is short outline of a fuller report available from the Centre for Policing.

The research which underpins this summary is an examination of public value, as seen by police, public service partners and members of the public, in terms of what is most important in the prioritising of policing activities. 125 participants ranked policing activities, and the report examines patterns in their responses. The Q analysis of priorities as chosen by the 125 participants identified four major views among people about what policing should prioritise:

1) Personal Harm - reducing serious personal psychological and physical harm; 2) Engagement - reducing community harm and creating a fearless society; 3) Crime-fighter - a focus on crime itself; and 4) Good Cop - policing that is committed to serving the public.

When examining these views across the three types of participants (police, partners and public), it was found that there were more similarities than differences across the three stakeholder groups, though the fourth view was predominantly held by the police themselves.

With more and wider expectations on police than they can deliver, what activities are most important to concentrate on, and which should some be de-prioritised? The public value

framework provides a way of thinking about this by focusing on what contributes to ‘the common good’. The public value framework enables deeper understanding of the common good. As developed by Moore (1995) and Benington (2011) and applied to the policing sector by Hesketh and Hartley (2015), public value is increasingly being applied by policy-makers, practitioners and academics as a way to understand demand and priorities. This research uses Benington’s definition of public value as consisting of two elements: what the public value and also what adds value to the public sphere.

In order to explore these subjective priorities, the study used Q methodology to understand what police stakeholders most (and least) value about policing. This research tool has been used relatively rarely in policing, and yet it can provide rich insights. Through using the Q method, the research aimed to identify both differences and similarities between the views of people about what the police should prioritise.

This consideration of public value and how to assess it leads to three research questions:

1. What are the views of police, public service partners and the public on policing priorities
2. How far do police, public service partners and public have similar or different views about public value?
3. How useful is Q methodology as a tool to assess public value?

### **Research design and method**

Q methodology has been used in a wide range of studies over the decades, but it has seldom been used in policing. The current study used focus groups, and Police and Crime Commissioner plans and an exercise with police and academics, to understand current views on police priorities. From all these sources, 510 statements relating to policing objectives, priorities or actions were identified. These statements were systematically analysed to eliminate duplicates and to ensure clarity resulting in a final list consisting of 62 statements that represented a fairly complete range of police priorities.

The Q sort therefore consisted of 62 statements which each participant was asked to sort the statements from high to low priority. They had to put all the statements in a grid with nine columns, representing high to low priority.

The grid was designed to allow participants to sort the statements based on how they would prioritise each statement. Due to the shape of the grid, the participants are forced to make

choices. The study made a deliberate decision to create a grid onto a magnetic white-board where the statements were printed onto magnetic acrylic tiles (The Q-Board). This approach allowed the experience to be far more tactile and interesting than a web-based or printed cards approach. The impact was immediate when participants saw the Q-Board for the first time, creating an element of curiosity and a willingness to get involved.

Participants came from three police forces, two public service organizations (a local authority and a public transport organization) and from members of the public in two locations.

Figure 1: Q Board with magnetic tiles, each tile with one policing activity.



## Results

The study achieved a very satisfactory number of participants, with 125 individuals completing the Q Sort. The 125 Q-sorts were analysed to determine patterns in the data based on different participant perspectives, and the analysis revealed the four major viewpoints:

- *Personal harm.* Participants who share this view displayed a tendency to focus on crimes that cause serious personal, psychological and physical harm (such as dealing with child sexual exploitation, sexual offences, domestic abuse and modern slavery). They want the police to focus on protecting people from, or reducing, these types of crimes.
- *Engagement.* Participants who share this view care about serious crimes but also tend to emphasise the importance of the police engaging with, interacting with and

encouraging feedback from the public. They want the police to improve partnership working and also have the police make better use of press and social media.

- *Crime-fighter*. Participants who share this view appear to have what has been more of a traditional view of policing where they value a police service that concentrates on dealing with criminal offences, particularly violent crime but also volume crime (burglary, vehicle theft) and road traffic offences. They place less priority on how this is achieved so less interested in training and development for the police, or partnership working compared with other groups. .
- *Good cop*. Participants who share this view care not only about what the police do, but how they go about doing it. They feel that the police should operate with a high degree of professionalism, following the code of ethics and the victims code, but they are also concerned to maximise police efficiency for example in using new technologies and providing value for money policing.

Apart from the fourth viewpoint which is predominantly held by police officers, the individuals who align to the first three viewpoints were a mixture of police, partners and members of the public. The groups had more similarities than differences in their perspectives about public value. This is interesting given the diverse societal expectations on what the police should do.



## Discussion

The research undertaken here makes three substantial contributions to the literature about public value and policing. First, it shows that Q methodology is a robust and sensitive tool for analysing how participants view their key priorities for policing.

Second, this is a novel methodology to address public value, as developed by Benington (2011), which focuses on both what the public value and also what adds value to the public

sphere. The former, what the public values, can be assessed through the Q sorts completed by members of the public because prioritizing policing activities is one way to operationalize public value. The second dimension, what adds value to the public sphere, may be assessed through the Q sorts completed by policing professionals and partners. This is slightly more controversial because it assumes that professionals are working in the ‘public interest’ (a claim not universally agreed). But the police in particular have detailed knowledge of how their activities may impact on the public sphere, and so the analysis addresses the second element of public value.

Third, the paper contributes to evidence based on the analysis of similarities and differences in views about policing priorities, as seen by police, by officials of policing partner organizations, and by members of the public. These contributions are substantively useful in relation to policing and they also advance the call for more empirical studies of public value. These findings may help police as they engage in decisions about priorities, and understand how the public view policing priorities.

Finally, the paper has illustrated what can be achieved through the co-creation of research where the research team is made up of academics and practitioners and which builds on the expertise of each, as designed in The Open University’s Centre for Policing Research and Learning. The results of the research can be of real value to practitioners even when starting with a highly abstract concept such as public value.

In addition, the Q-Board, far from solely being a research method has great potential for wider application, such as a community engagement and as an education tool. It has been used in two ways, based on the Q board and statements developed for this research.

First, members of the public appeared to engage well with the idea of prioritising policing activities and they said they found it interesting to work with the unique and colourful Q board. Some have also said they became aware of a wider range of police responsibilities as a result of their participation. This could be a means to help develop realistic stakeholder expectations through having to “prioritise” in the truest meaning of the word; rather than attempting to appease everyone which may inevitably lead to disappointment and the erosion of trust and confidence in the police. Thames Valley Police have used the Q board and statements in “world cafés” with members of the public, using the exercise to generate discussion about what is important to them in policing.

Q-Board used in public engagement at World Café Event by Thames Valley Police



Second, the Q board has been used in police discussions of demand management, in Open University facilitated evidence cafés. Police have completed the Q board in groups, and then reflected on what these priorities might mean for their own police force.

The Q sort being undertaken by police in an evidence café



**Keywords:** Public Value; Policing Priorities; Q Methodology; Q Board

## References

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## **Full report**

This executive summary is a brief overview of the longer report based on research carried out for the Centre by the authors. The full report it is being made available on The Open University's Centre for Policing Research and Learning website, initially in the members' area (available to Centre partners) and eventually it will be available on open access (i.e. to anyone).

## **Further enquiries**

Please contact the Centre on [oupc@open.ac.uk](mailto:oupc@open.ac.uk) if you wish to discuss any of the ideas in this report or use the Q Board for other research or public engagement.

## **Acknowledgements**

The research team would like to thank British Transport Police, Gwent Police, Gwent Office of Police and Crime Commissioner, Humberside Police, Metropolitan Police Service, Monmouthshire County Council and Network Rail for their participation in this research. The Centre for Policing partnership with 17 police agencies advised on and supported this research. The funding for this research came from the Police Knowledge Fund, through HEFCE and the Home Office and managed by the College of Policing. Thanks also to Thames Valley Police for the photo of a World Café.