

Working with the Private Security Industry to Enhance Public Policing

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I was recently contacted by a senior private security industry executive exasperated at the challenges of working with the police. He explained to me all the positive contributions to policing his company was making, but how the police attitude to them varied from positive embrace, indifference to outright hostility. How? He asked can we work more effectively together with the public police to better deal with the many social and crime problems we face? Surely, he argued it was common sense!

Indeed, when we consider the challenges of policing, it does seem obvious. There is and always will be the insatiable demand for the police to patrol the streets, but the resource constraints and effectiveness of this tactic mean this demand will never be met.² Many public areas suffer from anti-social behaviour, with the police incapable of addressing adequately.³ In the UK there is a shoplifting epidemic, but the police simply cannot respond, as one newspaper headline illustrated, “Police won’t attend every shoplifting despite ‘zero-tolerance’ pledge”, which highlighted only if there was violence would they respond.⁴ This is also a key area where police and private security could work together to tackle this problem with appropriate training, powers and cooperation, but partnership is far from common.

At the same time the police have ever increasing demands on their resources from the threat of mass casualty terrorism, highly resilient serious organised crime groups and complex crimes such as cybercrime – all of these are high priorities and require resources. This means that many of the ‘bread and butter’ police services the public want are being neglected.

The fiscal constraint perspective on private policing has always advocated the potential of embracing and utilising the private security industry to help fill that gap.⁵ However, in my 30 years of studying the private security industry, the status of the UK relationship between the public police and private security has hardly changed. Stenning identified a useful framework for considering the relationship between the police and private security, which maps out as follows:⁶

- Denial: police officers refuse to acknowledge that private security officers are a legitimate topic of discussion

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² BUTTON 2019.

³ O’MALLEY–GRACE 2021.

⁴ BBC 2024; The Telegraph 2023.

⁵ BUTTON 2019.

⁶ STENNING 1989.

- Grudging recognition: there is grudging recognition accompanied by denigration, where the increased role of private security can no longer be ignored, but is combined with a belief they are undertaking lesser activities such as property protection
- Competition and open hostility: the relationship moves to competition and open hostility where the growth of private security poses a threat to the police's claimed monopoly over policing; at the same time private security is recognised as a source of employment in retirement and a means to provide policing services under stretched budgets
- Calls for greater controls: next, there are calls for greater controls on the industry which has now become a necessary evil or legitimate component of policing
- Active partnership: active partnership arises where it is realised that private security has a significant role in policing
- Equal partnership: police and private security work together as equal powers

One of the best illustrations of how in many countries the relationship between private security can be maximised is the development of Project Griffin in 2004, which was rebranded as Action Counters Terrorism in 2016. This was an attempt by the state to bring private security staff into the counter terrorism network by providing training on spotting signs of terrorist activity and what to do in the event of an incident.⁷ The purpose of which was to expand the 'eyes and ears' of the private sector into the state counter terrorism structures. Reporting in 2013, the scheme boasted over 20,000 certificates of attendance issued, 1,500 bridge calls (a conference telephone call connecting large numbers of people) with 500 alone in the City of London.⁸ There has been little formal evaluation of these schemes, but they illustrate how on a significant scale the private security industry can work with the public police on a notable issue for the benefit of all.

Project Griffin is a rare example of strong partnership and more typical is evidenced by the mixed response to the Police Reform Act 2002. This created accreditation schemes, which could be pursued at the discretion of chief police officers. The most relevant to private security was the 'community safety accreditation scheme'. This enables chief police officers to accredit private security, wardens etc. where they complete a special training course for which in return, they secure access to some special powers, such as to issue fixed penalty notices, require the name and address of a person, confiscate alcohol, and tobacco. The scheme also aimed to create a better relationship with the police in the micro context they operate and allowed accredited officers to wear a special badge on their lapels, indicating higher status.⁹

⁷ HM Government 2016.

⁸ City Security 2013.

⁹ Home Office 2012.

The take up of these schemes has not been as popular as some hoped. In 2010, the Government published a survey of schemes in operation in 26 police force areas where the police chief chose to participate. It identified 2,219 staff accredited in over 130 schemes covering largely warden schemes, but also private security staff in shopping malls, hospitals and working for local authorities.¹⁰ There has been surprisingly little research evaluating these schemes, with the exception of one study which explored levels of public reassurance from different security actors, which noted the greater cost effectiveness of security officers.¹¹

The assumption of this article is that we should be working towards active partnership, but it is important to note, there are many who are sceptical of such an objective, who point to the limits of private security contributing to the public good, the many examples of poor standards; and prefer more state driven responses to the policing demands.¹² But unless there is a move towards a much more state driven economy with much higher taxation this would just not be plausible and probably would still be problematic. The idea that public policing offers a greater public good is also flawed as a search of the news for public failures is just as easy as for private security. Just to illustrate this, headline relating to a police employee, “Sussex PCSO filmed refusing to attend assault at shop”, is illustrative of many that can be found.¹³

The reality is that there are problems with both public and private responses. Focusing on the inadequacies, while often entertaining, does not solve the problems. Both public and private need to raise their game and most importantly more effectively work together. So, returning to the question the senior executive asked me, what can be done to better improve the relationship further. Well, one of the most impressive ideas I have seen is my observations from the 10 year anniversary conference at the Ludovika University of Public Service, Hungary. At this university, trainee security professionals study alongside police officers. This is unique, for while there are many degrees in policing and security all over the world, having trainees from both sectors studying together is unheard of. Indeed, when you start to consider the issue from a UK perspective, not only do police officers generally not study alongside private security, they also learn little about the sector in training.

It is also important to also not forget the need for effective strong regulation of the industry to enhance security.¹⁴ The introduction of regulation in the UK in 2001 has had many positive impacts, but the scheme was born with gaps. Filling those, such as the regulation of firms, sectors which are missing and setting higher standards of training are all important measures that would further raise standards.¹⁵ Police would then not be so much looking down on a partner but looking to one.

¹⁰ Home Office 2011.

¹¹ ROWLAND-COUPÉ 2014.

¹² LOADER-WHITE 2017.

¹³ MUREDDU-REID 2023.

¹⁴ BUTTON 2008.

¹⁵ BUTTON-STIERNSTEDT 2020.

So perhaps as well as better regulation, the solution is to have more joint studying and for the police to be taught during training the benefits of and how to work with private security. It might take a long time to change the culture of cooperation, but it is perhaps the only true path to active and equal partnership.

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