ACPO Reducing Bureaucracy Programme

Understanding crime recording

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Research, Analysis and Information

Acknowledgements

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Executive summary

The ACPO Reducing Bureaucracy Programme Board and the ACPO Performance Management Business Area commissioned NPIA Research, Analysis and Information (RAI) to undertake exploratory research on crime recording. The purpose of the research was to help identify and explain sources of potential unnecessary work relating to the crime recording process and to inform the development of force initiatives intended to improve the process. Findings are based on opinions of frontline police officers and officers and staff involved in the management of crime and the audit of the crime recording process.

Sources of perceived unnecessary work

The research identified three key sources of perceived unnecessary work relating to crime recording: reclassification, no-criming, and pursuing 'unwilling' victims. Reclassification takes place when an initial crime classification is believed to be incorrect. No-criming is the term used for actions taken when subsequent information establishes that a crime did not in fact occur. Repeated attempts to contact victims who do not wish to be involved in the investigation, in order to establish further detail about the nature of the incident, is in part a consequence of data requirements to support reclassification and no-criming decisions. Two overarching issues and five specific themes identified in the research help to explain perceived unnecessary work and disproportionate activity in relation to crime recording. The weighting or relative importance of these themes is difficult to assess as they often appeared to interact with and overlap each other.

Overarching issues: Risk aversion and use of professional judgement

Many respondents felt that their organisation was risk-averse in relation to crime recording; a risk-averse culture could explain to some extent levels of internal supervision and audit that accompany recording, reclassification, and no-criming decisions. Though many respondents saw the principles of the National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS) – the system which determines whether or not an incident is recorded as a crime – and the complexity of the Home Office Counting Rules (HOCR) – the guidelines by which crimes are classified as specific

offences – as limiting their ability to use professional judgement, there appears to be scope for greater use of judgement within current structures.

Explanatory themes

- **Knowledge and interpretation of HOCR and NCRS**. Most respondents were supportive of the principles of NCRS; a majority favoured combining categories of crime to simplify the HOCR. A combination of an apparent lack of knowledge of the counting rules, and what forces deemed acceptable detail for classification of specific crimes, appeared to result in a degree of disproportionate response and perceived unnecessary work. Forces and key national stakeholders (the National Crime Registrar; HMIC) appeared to have different interpretations of 'credible evidence to the contrary': the information required to establish that an incident should not be recorded as a crime. Misinterpretation of NCRS as requiring all reported allegations to be recorded as crimes, and forces' standards for what constitutes credible evidence to the contrary, may contribute to the over-recording of crime in some instances. Similarly, the opinions of force practitioners and national stakeholders appeared to differ in relation to what constitutes 'additional verifiable information' (AVI) to support a no-crime decision. Some forces appeared to require officers to produce physical, verified evidence – such as a written statement – to support a no-crime; national stakeholders said that a justification that could be verified if required was sufficient.

- **Performance**. Targets for reducing crime were perceived to lead to pressure to down-grade priority crimes to non-performance managed crime types; auditors said they could spend considerable amounts of time disputing classifications with crime managers. Performance targets for sanction detections also appeared to contribute in part to the pursuit of victims who did not wish to cooperate with an investigation, but who may be able to provide evidence to secure a detection. Despite the removal of national performance targets, it appeared that many officers still worked to targets relating to specific crime types and detections at either a force or sub-force level. Some respondents expressed scepticism that national targets had been removed; a couple said that, as long as data on crime and detections were available in league table format, forces would, in practice, work to targets.

- **Audit requirements**. There was evidence that a great deal of time is spent servicing internal audit requirements (for example gathering information to support correct classification or to justify a no-crime). In part, the focus on internal audit appeared to be driven by the perceived threat of external audit. Audit – both internal and external – is intended to ensure that data recorded by the police on crime has integrity. It was not clear whether practitioners in forces were aware of the emphasis of current external audit activity.

- **Force policies and processes**. Some forces appeared to have a policy of recording incidents as crimes as early as possible, sometimes apparently before officers had the opportunity to undertake appropriate enquiries. The result of criming early was perceived to be erroneous recording and/or inaccurate classification; incorrect recording and classification decisions could lead to additional work to collect the required information to support either reclassification or no-crime decisions. There were policies in some forces relating to who could create, access, and update crime reports, which could lead to frustration and duplication of work if additional information was required for reclassifications or no-crimes.

- **IT and systems**. A lack of integration between incident and crime systems appeared to result in duplication of work in some forces. Also, it appeared that electronic crime reports often required all fields to be completed whether or not the information was relevant, or the data were held elsewhere. Duplication of crime reports between forces was also identified as a problem. It is not generally possible to 'transfer' reports across force systems: a report has to be no-crimed by one force and information duplicated by another.

Implications for force initiatives on crime recording

Force initiatives to improve the crime recording process should take into account the overlapping nature of the key issues and explanatory themes. For example, removing performance pressures may make it easier to identify where disproportionate activity relates to a lack of knowledge about NCRS and HOCR. While there are some improvements that could be made in the short term in relation to forces' policies, processes, and IT systems, other improvements will involve changing embedded cultures and may best be accomplished in the context of other initiatives to encourage greater use of professional judgement.

1. Introduction

Research published in 2000[1] revealed inconsistencies in the way crime was recorded both within and across forces. The decision whether or not to record an incident as a crime appeared to be influenced by officers' discretion, and there was evidence of crimes being 'downgraded' in certain categories. The adoption of the National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS) in 2002 sought to address the issue of variability in crime recording by establishing a framework that would make recording decisions consistent across forces. An evaluation of the implementation of NCRS was conducted in 2003[2]; it found that, although crime recording data quality had improved following the introduction of NCRS, there was considerable variation between and within forces, and by type of crime.

Subsequent Audit Commission work[3] assessed compliance with national standards for crime recording across the forty-three forces. Improvement was recognised in relation to overall crime recording performance, but there still appeared to be variation between and within forces at BCU level. It was also identified that some forces demonstrated a commitment to 'intensive checking' of data that did not appear proportionate, was not an effective use of public resources, and did not result in a more victim-focused police service.

A recent review[4] undertaken by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) examined perceived unnecessary bureaucracy arising from police forces' application of the NCRS and the Home Office Counting Rules (HOCR) (see Box A). A recommendation was made for a more proportionate approach to the supervision and auditing of incidents and crime. Building on the HMIC work, NPIA Research, Analysis and Information Unit (RAI) was commissioned by ACPO's Reducing Bureaucracy Programme Board and the ACPO Performance Management Business Area to identify and further explain sources of perceived unnecessary work within the crime recording process.

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[1] Burrows et al. 2000. *Review of police forces' crime recording practices*. Home Office Research Study 204.
[2] Simmons et al. 2003. *National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS): an analysis of the impact on recorded crime*. Home Office Online Report 31/03.
[3] Audit Commission. 2006. *Crime recording 2005*. London: Audit Commission.
[4] HMIC (unpublished) *Cutting the blue tape.*

> **Box A: Home Office Counting Rules and the National Crime Recording Standard**
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> The **Home Office Counting Rules (HOCR)**[5] set out how crime should be **classified** by the police. This includes what type and how many notifiable offences are classified following an incident.
>
> The **National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS)** forms part of the HOCR. NCRS aims to promote a consistent standard of crime recording between police forces, and a more victim-oriented approach. The principles of NCRS guide **whether** and **when** a crime should be recorded.

It is intended that this exploratory research will inform a set of force initiatives to improve the crime recording process. The purpose of these initiatives will be to encourage a more proportionate approach to crime recording, eliminating unnecessary work, and realising savings including officer time and resources.

Research methods

The research was conducted by RAI with a purposive sample[6] of seven forces during April and May 2011. Following a review of key background documents, data was collected through a total of thirty in-depth interviews with police officers and staff involved at different stages of the crime recording process: force crime registrars and officers and staff with audit responsibilities, crime managers, and senior officers with supervisory roles. RAI also conducted one focus group in each of the seven forces with frontline officers from response, neighbourhood teams, and CID. More details can be found in the Appendix.

The research findings are based on the opinions of frontline police officers, officers and staff involved in the management of crime, and officers and staff involved in the audit of the crime recording process.

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[5] Home Office. 2011. *Counting Rules for Recorded Crime (as of April 2011) Annex A.*
[6] A non-random sample selected according to criteria. Please see the Appendix for further details.

Report structure

The report outlines the key sources of perceived unnecessary work and disproportionate activity in relation to crime recording. It then details two overarching and five specific themes that help to explain potential sources of unnecessary work and disproportionate activity.

Finally, the report draws conclusions and discusses the implications of the findings for force initiatives to improve the crime recording process.

2. Main sources of perceived unnecessary work

The research identified three key sources of perceived unnecessary work relating to crime recording: reclassification, no-criming, and pursuing 'unwilling' victims. Reclassification takes place when an initial crime classification is believed to be incorrect. No-criming is the term used for actions taken when subsequent information establishes that a crime did not in fact occur. Repeated attempts to contact victims who do not wish to be involved in the investigation, in order to establish further detail about the nature of the incident, is in part a consequence of data requirements to support reclassification and no-criming decisions.

Reclassification and no-criming

The reclassification of a crime takes place where the initial classification is believed by a crime manager or by audit personnel to be incorrect. A certain level of reclassification is expected within forces as part of the reality of responding to and investigating incidents. However, the research participants perceived unnecessary work at two stages of the reclassification process. Firstly, additional officer time may be required to support a reclassification. It appeared that frontline officers were frequently requested to obtain further information about the circumstances surrounding the offence; these further enquiries might involve telephone conversations or a return to the scene of the incident. Secondly, many respondents reported reclassification decisions being disputed: crime reports were often said to go back-and-forth between audit personnel and crime managers or detectives, and the involvement of supervisors might be required to finalise a decision.

The process of removing a crime from force systems, known as 'no-criming', is conducted when there is subsequent evidence that a crime did not take place. 'Additional verifiable information' (AVI) is required to support a no-crime. Again, it appeared that frontline officers often had to undertake a significant amount of work to collect this information.

Unwilling victims

'Unwilling' victims are those who, for whatever reason, do not wish to cooperate with the police to establish that an offence has occurred, or provide information that might correctly classify an offence. The pursuit of unwilling or uncooperative victims was, to an extent, a by-product of reclassification and no-criming. In circumstances where a crime was subsequently deemed not to have taken place, or where a crime had been correctly recorded but the wrong classification applied, frontline officers often appear to be required to pursue victims for additional information to support reclassification or no-criming decisions. Several explanations were offered for why some victims are reluctant to cooperate with the police. Some incidents are fairly trivial and victims may simply want the police to know about it, but do not expect them to investigate. Other incidents are reported by third parties, and the victims do not want police involvement. Many interviewees also cited instances of crimes, such as theft of personal property, where victims simply want a crime number for insurance purposes. The time spent pursuing unwilling victims again appeared to be mainly borne by frontline officers who said they had to make additional enquiries. In some forces, officers and staff cited incident logs with multiple entries recording efforts to contact specific individuals.

3. Key overarching issues

The research identified two overarching issues that help to explain why a disproportionate amount of time may be spent on the crime recording process: risk-aversion and use of professional judgement.

Risk aversion

The concepts of risk and risk aversion have become increasingly prominent in policing. There is a sense that police policies and processes have become

focused on minimising the reputational risk to the service at the expense of proportionate response to incidents.[7]

The majority of interviewees held a strong view that their force was a risk-averse organisation. In relation to crime recording, the risk-averse approach was embedded in the process of internal audit whereby the choices an officer makes responding to and disposing of an incident are recorded and reviewed.

The culture of 'covering your back' seemed to have permeated to frontline officers involved in the crime recording process. Though crime managers and audit personnel felt that crime reports often lacked appropriate details, the focus groups revealed that some frontline officers were extremely concerned with providing what they perceived to be necessary detail. In one example, an officer said that they frequently checked through details entered by call centre staff on command and control logs as they did not trust them to be thorough. Some officers said that they produced detailed reports because, if they did not, the reports might be sent back to them at some point, which could be inconvenient and dispiriting.

A risk-averse culture could be seen to permeate all the explanatory themes for perceived unnecessary work in crime recording, from interpretation of NCRS and the HOCR, through the amount of data collected to evidence (re)classification and no-criming decisions, to the level of supervision and internal audit.

Use of professional judgement

There was a strong view from the majority of officers that they were not allowed to use their professional judgement in relation to the crime recording process. There is a distinction to be made in this respect, however, between the NCRS and HOCR. While classification according to the HOCR is relatively prescriptive, the initial recording of crime under the NCRS requires officers to use a degree of professional judgement. The NCRS states that an incident will be recorded as a crime if, on the balance of probability, 'the circumstances as reported amount to a crime by law' and 'there is no credible evidence to the contrary'. It further states that the police will determine if the first of these conditions is met 'based

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[7] See for example Heaton, R. 2011. We could be criticised! Policing and risk aversion. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, 5 (1): 75-86.

on their knowledge of the law and the counting rules'. There is, consequently, scope for officers to use their professional judgement around whether a report should, for example, be recorded as an incident of anti-social behaviour or a crime of harassment – provided that judgement applies the law to the facts.

In practice, however, many officers felt that their ability to use professional judgement was constrained by force requirements for documentation around credible evidence to the contrary. These requirements may in themselves have resulted from a risk-averse culture having developed around supervision and audit. A minority of interviewees expressed frustration at incidents being recorded as crimes despite officers' judgements that an offence had not taken place. The research suggested that what individual officers, forces, and national stakeholders understood by credible evidence to the contrary – and indeed AVI – may sometimes differ (see below). It is possible, therefore, that some officers believe that their professional judgement is restricted by the NCRS when, in fact, it is their force's strict interpretation of what constitutes 'credible evidence to the contrary' that is restrictive.

Although there does appear to be scope for bringing professional judgement to bear on the process of crime recording, a majority of interviewees and frontline officers felt that time spent on gathering information to support reclassification and no-crime decisions, and pursuing unwilling victims, are areas of work in which professional judgement is not currently exercised.

4. Key explanatory themes

There were five specific themes that helped to explain perceived unnecessary work in relation to crime recording: knowledge and interpretation of the NCRS and HOCR, performance, audit requirements, force policies and processes, and IT and systems. It is difficult to quantify which theme or themes were most dominant, as they interact and overlap to varying degrees. The themes are, consequently, not presented in order of strength or importance. It is likely that different themes, or combinations of themes, exert more or less influence over the crime recording process in different contexts.

Knowledge and interpretation of HOCR and NCRS

The first specific theme identified by the research was a perceived lack of understanding among many frontline officers of the HOCR, and a more general misunderstanding of the principles of the NCRS.

Knowledge of HOCR

A majority of research participants involved in the management and audit of crime recording felt that frontline officers had insufficient knowledge of HOCR to make consistently accurate classification decisions. Frontline officers were said to often submit incomplete crime reports that did not conform to HOCR standards. Conversely, many of the frontline officers interviewed felt that they had the knowledge to make accurate classifications.

> "I have been a police officer for twenty-seven years; if I can't tell a burglary from a criminal damage I may as well hang up my hat" (Police Constable).

Some frontline officers expressed frustration and a degree of demoralisation at not being trusted to make recording decisions. A few saw the information demands made of them as indicative of a force focus on performance, and a few stated directly that they believed that crimes were reclassified to meet performance targets.

It is not possible to be sure from this research whether the primary issue in relation to the HOCR is lack of knowledge on the part of frontline officers, or excessive data requirements by force crime managers and audit personnel for reasons relating to performance, concern over external audit, or simple pedantry.

There was a strong view across respondents in the research sites that the counting rules should be simplified to create fewer crime categories and, as a result, fewer 'grey areas'. In particular, it was felt that certain categories of violent crime could be amalgamated. Simplification of the rules in this respect could result in a reduction in both the amount of time frontline officers spend pursuing victims for information, and the time spent debating the correct

classification between crime managers, supervisors, and audit personnel. These benefits would, of course, have to be balanced against the disruption to established trends in specific crime types.

A majority of frontline officers stated a preference for the HOCR to be aligned with Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) charging standards. Though this alignment would appeal in terms of being more straightforward – everybody working to the same criteria – charging standards can vary across time. The CPS traditionally has performance targets for the number of successful prosecutions, meaning that in practice there may be an incentive to charge a less serious offence than has been recorded by the police.[8] Aligning crime recording with charging standards may therefore undermine one of the core principles of NCRS: consistency of recording.

Misunderstanding of NCRS

Officers and staff involved in the management and audit of crime were generally extremely supportive of the principles of NCRS, and clear that NCRS was required to ensure consistency of recording across forces and to maintain public confidence in the crime recording process. Though many frontline officers said they thought NCRS did not leave much scope for use of professional judgement around crime recording, the explanations and examples given in support of this view sometimes demonstrated a lack of understanding of the principles of NCRS (see Box B).

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[8] Previous research has highlighted police officers' perceptions that the CPS sometimes downgraded crimes from 'racially aggravated' to the basic offence in order to improve the likelihood of securing a conviction (see Docking, M. and Tuffin, R. 2005. *Racist incidents: Progress since the Lawrence inquiry*. Home Office Online Report 42/05).

Box B: Principles of NCRS[9]

- All incidents brought to the attention of the police will result in an incident report.

- An incident will be recorded as a crime if, on the balance of probability: the incident is defined as a crime by law, and there is no credible evidence to the contrary.

- Once recorded as a crime, AVI is required to support a no-crime decision.

A majority of the frontline officers interviewed saw NCRS principles as determining any incident reported by a member of the public had to be recorded as a crime. The result was that an incident could be 'crimed' before a thorough investigation had taken place. If, following an investigation, it was apparent that an offence had not in fact occurred and the incident was required to be no-crimed, this often necessitated further work in terms of collecting AVI. It appeared that the work associated with no-criming was sometimes significant and certainly greater than if an incident had remained as an incident pending further enquiries and clarifications.

The NCRS requirement for AVI to support a no-crime decision was perceived by a majority of interviewees as excessive. There are historical reasons for the AVI requirement, which resulted in part from research that suggested there was considerable disparity between forces in relation to which incidents ended up being no-crimed.[10] The requirement precludes forces from no-criming incidents simply on the basis of one or more officers being of the opinion that an offence did not in fact occur. The present research suggested, however, that the main issue may not be the AVI requirement itself, but forces' interpretation of what constitutes AVI. It appeared that some forces interpreted AVI as 'physical', *verified* evidence – such as a written statement – that documents a decision (see Box C for an example). National stakeholders, by contrast expressed the view that NCRS requires only *verifiable* information: a justification for a decision for which evidence could be provided if that decision were subject to internal or

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[9] Home Office. 2011. *Counting Rules for Recorded Crime (as of April 2011) Annex A*.
[10] For a discussion, see Burrows et al. 2000. *Review of police forces' crime recording practices.* Home Office Research Study 204.

external audit. In this sense, some forces' standards for what constitutes AVI may be unnecessarily high. In some instances, strict requirements may reflect customs, practices and personalities in specific forces. It may also be that established practices in some forces have been influenced to some extent by experiences of previous external audits.

> **Box C: Force requirement for additional verifiable information**
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> In one force, an officer attended a suspected burglary. On arrival, the home owner was unsure whether there had been forced entry or whether his dog had dislodged the door. On the balance of probabilities, the incident was crimed as a burglary. No statement was taken. A couple of days later the owner phoned back to say he had just seen the dog jump up and break the door. An officer was sent back to the address to take a written statement to support a no-crime decision, despite the owner confirming over the telephone that no offence had been committed. The member of the public, apparently, expressed surprise that they had been required to provide a statement to say that a crime had not occurred when a full written statement had not been taken at the time they reported the incident.

It is possible that some officers' and forces' interpretation of what constitutes 'credible evidence to the contrary' is similar to their interpretation of what constitutes AVI. As a consequence, officers might feel that their scope for using professional judgment in relation to recording 'spurious' reports of crime is limited if documentary evidence is not available (as opposed to simply having a credible justification for why an incident should not be recorded as a crime, which could be supported with evidence if necessary). In some instances, it appeared that officers felt that it was simply easier to crime an incident than to justify a decision not to record it as a crime. It is possible that a combination of officers' interpretations of NCRS and forces' interpretations of what constitutes 'credible evidence to the contrary' may result in the over-recording of crime in some instances.[11]

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[11] It is possible that perceptions and interpretations vary within and between forces influenced, perhaps, by factors such as performance and attitudes to risk. Recent inspection work by HMIC found that a proportion of a sample of audited incidents were not recorded as crimes by forces when they in fact should have been.

Finally, a view shared by a handful of officers was that the presumption to record an incident as a crime on the balance of probabilities meant that NCRS compels forces to investigate a great deal of very low-level incidents of crime. When pressed, however, these respondents conceded that there is no requirement to investigate associated with NCRS, and that it is forces' own policies that dictate whether or not an investigation takes place. These particular officers appeared to take the view that the police have a moral duty to investigate any crime, irrespective of the value to the victim or the wider public.

Performance

There was a strong perception across participating forces that a narrow, target-driven performance culture was responsible for a proportion of the perceived unnecessary work relating to crime recording. Though central performance targets relating to reducing specific crime types have been discontinued, and the Home Secretary has encouraged forces to focus simply on 'cutting crime', it appeared that many officers still worked to targets relating to specific crime types either at a force, or, frequently, a sub-force level. In addition, there appeared to be a degree of scepticism among some respondents that there was no longer an interest in national comparisons.

In the context of targets relating to specific priority crime types, many respondents highlighted protracted debates between internal stakeholders relating to classification decisions. In relation to crime recording more widely, the other key performance target that appeared to influence perceived unnecessary work was achieving sanction detections. Some interviewees were aware, however, of the potentially damaging effect that a focus on performance, rather than on meeting the needs of the victim, may have on measures of user-satisfaction and wider public confidence in the police.

Some perceived unnecessary work was seen to be generated by officers pursuing victims for sanction detections. These views were most evident in forces with the strongest internal emphasis on performance, but performance was clearly a key explanatory theme in all participating forces.

Reducing crime

The balance of views across the participating forces indicated that target-driven performance management influenced crime recording activity in relation to both no-criming and reclassification.

If forces (or divisions within forces) are measured by overall crime rates, there is clearly an incentive to record as few offences as possible. Few interviewees expressed the opinion, however, that individuals were spending a disproportionate amount of time ensuring that incidents in which on the balance of probabilities an offence **had** occurred were **not** recorded as crimes (an activity that has been known as 'cuffing'). If anything, the balance of opinions was that forces had moved towards a position of over, as opposed to under, recording. There was also no widespread sense of influence being exerted on officers or staff to no-crime incidents that had been recorded correctly.

In a few cases, interviewees highlighted pressure to ensure crimes (that may have been recorded incorrectly) were taken off the system. This pressure resulted in frontline officers gathering, as a priority, further evidence to meet the force AVI standards for no-criming. Often, however, as no-crimes were regarded as more difficult to achieve than reclassifications, it appeared that crime managers and/or detectives might instead seek to reclassify a crime out of a 'priority' category. The impact on frontline officers could be similar in terms of being asked to provide further information in relation to the circumstances of the incident to support a reclassification decision.

A majority of respondents felt that a disproportionate amount of time was devoted to attempts to reclassify crimes. Often, targets associated with specific priority crimes appeared to be more salient than overall crime. A minority of officers reported a focus on reclassifying incidents to non-performance managed crimes, for example: Grievous Bodily Harm (GBH) to common assault, robbery to theft, or burglary to criminal damage. This would result in disputes between crime managers, supervisors, and audit personnel over the correct classification.

Although there was a strong sense that performance accounts for a proportion of the unnecessary work associated with crime recording, it was not possible to tell how often performance pressure actually influenced final classification or reclassification decisions. Although there was a strong view among some

frontline officers and crime managers that performance influenced classification, there was an equally strong view from some registrars and audit personnel that, although disagreements could be protracted, they did not allow reclassification for performance reasons. A few interviewees, and a national stakeholder, expressed the view that the degree to which performance influences classification depends on the degree of support the force crime registrar receives from the senior management team.

Achieving detections

Many frontline officers saw the pursuit of unwilling victims as at least partly driven by chasing sanction detections. A few officers talked about supervisors 'trawling for crimes' on the incident log to identify a detection opportunity, or officers being sent back to victims to gather extra information for the same purpose.

A majority of officers identified certain types of low-level crime, such as criminal damage and theft, as more likely to involve unwilling victims. The low level of engagement with police was felt by officers to be the result of victims of these types of crimes having little need for police involvement beyond a crime report number for insurance purposes, or the victim's assessment that there was little likelihood of getting their property back. Officers appeared to pursue such victims to gather additional evidence in the pursuit of detections, though there was little likelihood the victim would engage further.

The research highlighted a possible tension between performance targets associated with crime and those associated with detections. In certain circumstances, described by some interviewees as 'grey areas', it may be possible for an officer to use their professional judgement to make a decision not to record an incident as a crime. An example given by several respondents was a drunken dispute outside licensed premises. If nobody had made a report of a specific offence, or if the participants in the dispute were unwilling to provide details as to what had occurred, an officer might decide to either issue a warning or to make an arrest or arrests for being 'drunk and disorderly'. As no notifiable offence would be recorded, this decision would help with a target to reduce violent crime. Alternatively, an officer could decide to make an arrest or arrests

for a 'Section 5' public order offence – causing public alarm, fear, or distress – which would result in a recordable crime with an 'automatic' detection. In one force, an interviewee cited an example of where a reclassification dispute had been escalated to the Deputy Chief Constable to adjudicate between 'drunk and disorderly' and 'Section 5 public order'.

Overall, performance was a consistent thread that could be seen to relate in some respect to most other themes uncovered by the research. A narrow, target-driven performance culture was clearly stronger in some forces than others, and most likely varied in strength between different organisational units within forces. Many interviewees felt that performance pressure had begun to decrease in recent months, but that progress had and would be slow due to the entrenched nature of the target-driven culture. A couple of interviewees made the point that moving away from central targets will only help up to a point: as long as HMIC continue to publish performance data, and as long as forces are compared to their peers on iQUANTA, some ACPO-level officers will view their position in league tables as pseudo-targets – and the performance focus and associated pressure will, to some extent, remain. Also, although eliminating targets associated with specific crime types may help to reduce perceived unnecessary work around reclassification, an increased emphasis on reducing overall crime might maintain or increase such activity associated with no-criming.

Audit requirements

Internal audit

A majority of frontline officers stated that many of the tasks they perceived as unnecessary were undertaken to satisfy the requirements of internal audit. Though a proportion of incorrect classifications may result from the complexity of the HOCR and officers' knowledge of the rules, a majority of officers and audit personnel saw the information demands for reclassifications and no-criming as disproportionate.

Though it was also identified as a potential sanction detection opportunity, the pursuit of unwilling victims sometimes appeared to occur to satisfy perceived internal requirements for data to support classification decisions. A few frontline

officers felt they had to collect detailed information to ensure their 'backs were covered'. Disputes over crime classification between officers and audit staff could involve numerous people to resolve the issue (see Box D).

In some instances, additional data requirements generated by internal audit appeared to be prompted by differing understandings within the force of what constituted AVI to support a no-crime decision. The result was twofold: officers sometimes gathered insufficient evidence to meet the force interpretation of AVI and were then requested to gather further evidence and, as a consequence, time was spent debating whether or not the evidence met the AVI standard.

Box D: Crime recording: Worst case scenario

RAI sought to informally 'map' the crime recording process in the participating forces during the in-depth interviews. In one force, a 'worst case scenario' would have involved the same crime being classified, checked and/or reclassified by up to five individuals.
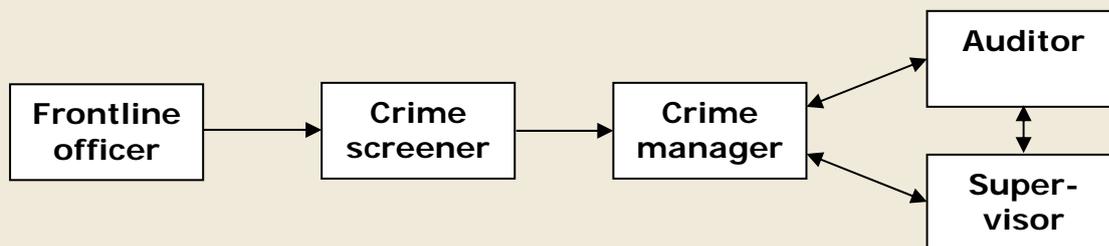
In the Basic Command Unit (BCU) visited, the crime manager (a Sergeant) had four staff who acted as 'screeners' to identify crimes that required reclassification. Despite the existence of the screener role, the crime manager reported checking all crimes personally. A supervisor (Superintendent) also said they checked priority crimes such as burglary three times per shift. The force operated a fairly extensive internal audit regime involving five full-time staff working in rolling cycles across BCUs. The crime registrar was unaware that crime managers personally checked every crime report (though crime managers may not have checked all crime reports in all BCUs). Though not all forces will have this exact structure, the research did give the impression that some crimes, especially those in priority performance categories, were subject to multiple levels of classification, supervision and audit.

The majority of officers and staff involved in the process of internal audit felt that the amount of time devoted to auditing the crime recording process was proportionate. There was, rightly or wrongly, a general mistrust of frontline officers' knowledge of the HOCR and their ability to classify crimes correctly. Indeed, several audit personnel and crime managers expressed the view that classification was a specialist task best performed by central teams.

Though it varied between forces, there appeared to be a tendency for a majority of crime registrars and audit personnel to err on the side of caution when classifying crimes; in some instances, this appeared to lead to a degree of pedantry when applying the counting rules. The internal requirement for data sometimes seemed to give little consideration to whether the collection required a disproportionate amount of frontline police officer time.

External audit

The extent to which the amount of time devoted to internal audit was driven by concerns around external audit was not always clear. In some forces, however, it did appear that a key driver of audit activity was the perceived threat of failing an external audit. The prospect of external inspection was identified by a minority of audit personnel as the reason for a strong focus on compliance with NCRS and the HOCR. In particular, the threat of external inspection was used to justify the data required for (re)classification and no-crimes.

It appeared that the strong compliance focus in some forces was based on the potential risk of harm to organisational reputation that was perceived to result from a poor inspection report. One interviewee expressed the view that if the force was to fail an audit on crime recording it had the effect of casting doubts upon the validity of all statistics produced by the force.

Proportionate audit at a national level is intended to ensure that information about crime recorded by the police and, increasingly, presented to the public has a proportionate degree of integrity and supports transparency. The last extensive external audit of crime recording was undertaken by the Audit

Commission (report published in 2006).[12] This audit focused, in part, on the correct classification of crimes. HMIC work undertaken following the 'Cutting the Blue Tape' report had a different focus. The HMIC work concentrated on crime recording (compliance with NCRS) and the appropriateness and proportionality of investigation. That being the case, it appears that some forces may be operating an extensive internal audit regime focused on compliance with outdated external inspection criteria.

Force policies and processes

Issues surrounding knowledge and interpretation of NCRS and HOCR, performance cultures, and audit were observed in all participating forces. There were, however, particular policies and processes that were observed in specific forces that appeared to have a direct impact on the amount of work associated with crime recording. One policy that could have a considerable effect on perceived unnecessary work was corporate decisions around who made crime recording and classification decisions, and at what point. Force processes for creating and updating crime reports could also cause delays and frustrations.

When and how to crime

Policies for how and when to record and classify crime varied. Some forces operated a central crime bureau that made the majority of criming decisions; others placed the responsibility for criming with frontline officers. Some appeared to operate a hybrid model. One force, in which there appeared to be a particularly strong performance culture, allowed frontline officers to record and classify some crimes, while crime managers were responsible for classifying priority crimes such as burglary and robbery.

Some forces appeared to have a policy of criming an incident at the first possible opportunity. One reason for this policy seemed to be the desire not to have too many incident logs open on the command and control system. Whilst there can be advantages to this policy – information is available more quickly to crime pattern analysts; victims receive a crime number immediately if they require one

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[12] The Audit Commission began transferring its responsibilities for auditing local public bodies in August 2010. It is anticipated that once the transfer of these functions is complete, the Audit Commission will be disbanded.

for insurance purposes – a majority of officers believed criming early led both to the misclassification of crimes and the recording of 'spurious' reports of crime.

NCRS states that 'a crime should be recorded as soon as the reporting officer is satisfied that it is more likely than not that a crime has been committed'. The NCRS also includes a 'national requirement' that 'an incident should be recorded as a crime within a standard timescale of 3 x 24 hour periods from the time the incident is first logged' (commonly known as the 'seventy-two hour rule'). There was little sense in some forces that officers were able to make use of the time available to them when making recording decisions. While unnecessary delays in making recording decisions are not desirable[13], allowing time for initial enquiries or some form of initial investigation can enable proper application of the balance of probabilities and a more informed decision about whether or not to record a crime. National stakeholders felt that it should be possible to correctly classify the majority of incidents within a few hours if appropriate enquiries are undertaken.

Inaccurate recording, as a result of criming an incident before an initial investigation has taken place, could, of course, result in additional work if an incident subsequently required no-criming. The national crime registrar provided an example of the problems that can result from criming an incident before an initial investigation has taken place (see Box E). Previous research has also found that filing crime reports very quickly can lead to incorrect classifications and additional work no-criming reports.[14]

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[13] As well as contradicting a principle of NCRS, previous work undertaken on behalf of ACPO established that, in relation to reports of rape, there was considerable variation in the time that forces took to record an incident as a crime. Some forces appeared to have a policy of taking the full seventy-two hours to record. This disparity in the time taken to record appeared to result in fewer incidents being recorded as crimes in certain forces (Gee, 2010, unpublished. *ACPO Rape Portfolio Stocktake 2009/10*).

[14] Burrows et al. 2000.

Box E: Criming too early

A caller reported a burglary at a house with TV and laptop stolen. As opposed to recording an incident on the command and control system (which would require an officer to attend, undertake an initial investigation and subsequently create a crime report) the call taker recorded a crime directly on the crime system. The caller was given a crime report number within 10 minutes of the report. Within two hours, officers visited the scene and were immediately suspicious: there was no evidence of forced entry, and other information caused them to suspect insurance fraud. When officers returned a second time, they found that a window was now broken. They concluded that no crime – or at least no burglary – had been committed. As the caller remained adamant that he had been burgled, the force spent many hours of officer, registrar and audit effort (including seeking a ruling from the national registrar) justifying the 'no-crime'. Had the force opted to allow a preliminary investigation to take place before recording the incident as a crime, much of this effort could have been avoided.

Creating and updating crime reports

The research identified an issue around how forces chose to create crime reports. A majority of forces had call handlers to take crime reports. A few officers said that often crime reports were completed at the end of a shift as they were unable to get through to the call handlers because of high demand. In this situation, officers had to absent themselves close to the end of their shift to ensure all crime reports were taken.

A minority of officers reported difficulties in updating crime reports. In one force, officers were only able to update the crime report through a call handler. In another, any updates to the crime report had to be submitted either by email or fax. In one force, call handlers were not allowed to manually link suspects on the system and officers were therefore required to log on and perform this task themselves. The research suggested that there are issues with the processes involved in crime reporting that can lead to unnecessary work at later stages.

IT and systems

The final explanatory theme for unnecessary work was the nature of force IT and

systems, which often appeared to result in duplication of work. For historical reasons, command and control systems for dealing with incidents, and systems for recording crimes, developed separately. Some forces have now moved to integrated incident and crime systems. A minority of the participating forces did not have an integrated incident and crime system. If systems were not linked, data was often duplicated from one system to another when creating a crime report. If certain details needed to be altered, this could require updating both systems. A majority of audit personnel and officers identified this duplication of work as time wasted. Some respondents suggested that this duplication of work could be avoided if certain crimes were left on command and control systems and not duplicated to crime systems. Indeed, there is no requirement in NCRS that crimes are recorded on crime (as opposed to command and control) systems.

A few officers and staff suggested that the complexity of crime reports themselves could result in time being wasted. Examples were given of crime reports containing what the interviewee regarded as too many mandatory fields. Some respondents felt that certain fields were incidental to many crimes, and did not assist either the crime recording process or the service given to the victim. Examples were also given in one force of officers being required to duplicate details of identical offences to multiple crime reports where the only difference was the name of the victim.

There appeared to be a lack of flexibility in some force systems once an incident had been given a crime number and entered on a crime system. For example, in some forces it appeared that duplicate crime reports could not be deleted on IT systems: officers had to enter details into the mandatory fields in order that the incident could be no-crimed.

A few interviewees identified unnecessary work due to transferring crime reports over force lines. As force systems tended to be incompatible, if a crime had taken place in one force but had been recorded in another, the crime report could not be transferred. Instead, data from a report would have to be re-entered into another force system, and the original force would have to no-crime the report on their system. It appeared that smaller police forces, bordered by several other forces, found this to be a recurrent issue.

5. Conclusions and implications

There was a perception amongst practitioners that there is unnecessary work generated by the process of crime recording which appeared to be mainly concerned with reclassification, no-criming, and the pursuit of unwilling victims. The research identified several themes, consistent across the participating forces, which helped to explain sources of perceived unnecessary work, duplication, and disproportionate response. Two linked issues – risk-aversion and use of professional judgement – were overarching, and five explanatory themes could be set against them: knowledge and interpretation of the NCRS and HOCR, performance, audit requirements, force policies and processes, and IT and systems.

Practitioners interviewed for this research had what appeared to be an almost automatic tendency to cite the restrictiveness of the NCRS and the complexity of the HOCR as part of the explanation for the disproportionate amount of time they perceived as devoted to crime recording. While the amalgamation of some categories of crime might make the system more user-friendly, the benefits associated with simplification would have to be set against the disruption of trends in specific crime categories.

Within the system as it stands, however, there does appear to be scope for forces to encourage greater use of professional judgement in order to achieve similar ends. If forces simply had, where appropriate, less stringent requirements for evidencing decisions around the initial criming of incidents, and the subsequent reclassification and no-criming of incidents recorded or classified erroneously, then frontline officers would be required to spend less time pursuing unwilling victims and collecting information that is of little use for any purpose other than crime recording. Focusing less upon classification, and more on proportionate investigation, should also reduce the amount of time interviewees perceived as taken up by disputes between different people at various stages of the crime recording process.

Communication between force crime registrars and key national stakeholders, particularly HMIC, may help to reassure some forces about encouraging greater use of professional judgement around the crime recording process. The views of

force practitioners and national stakeholders tended to differ in relation to what was acceptable in relation to both 'credible evidence to the contrary' and AVI. It was not clear from the interviews and focus groups whether officers and staff were aware of the current HMIC inspection criteria. It may be useful for force audit personnel to work through some example incidents with members of the HMIC inspection team in order to clarify exactly what level of information and explanation is required to support both decisions not to record an incident as a crime and decisions to no-crime an incident.

It appeared that there is scope for reducing the proportion of crimes that are classified erroneously. It is difficult to know whether erroneous classifications occur primarily as a result of officers misunderstanding the counting rules, or whether performance culture has a greater effect. The evidence from this research suggested that, although frontline officers perceived performance as an issue, performance pressure was felt most acutely by crime managers and other supervisors. Erroneous classification in the first instance is perhaps more likely to be the result of, in some cases, force policies to crime incidents as early as possible and, more generally, a risk-averse culture leading to the recording of incidents that should not have been recorded.

In order to reduce instances of incorrect recording and classification, forces could attempt to increase officers' knowledge and understanding of the principles of the NCRS and the detail of the HOCR. Some interviewees were sceptical, however, of the need for frontline officers to be experts in crime classification. One approach would be to, firstly, make sure officers and initial call takers are aware of whether and when to record an incident as a crime, in order to reduce the number of incidents that require no-criming. Secondly, forces could encourage greater use of professional judgement, at all levels, about the level of detail required for classification, in order to reduce the proportion of reclassifications that appear to occur as a result of a process-driven desire for accuracy and compliance. Frontline officers should be able to make accurate classifications within broader crime categories, provided there was no perverse incentive to do otherwise.

Performance management driven by the pursuit of numerical targets did appear to be responsible for a proportion of the perceived unnecessary work relating to

reclassification and the pursuit of unwilling victims. If forces were to encourage greater use of professional judgement around classification, and reduce the proportion of internal audit activity devoted to classification (as opposed to compliance with NCRS in relation to recording), they should be aware of the potential confounding effect of performance culture. Without a move away from performance managing specific 'priority' crime categories, reducing internal audit requirements and encouraging greater use of professional judgement might result in classification and reclassification decisions influenced by performance targets.

Finally, the research suggested that forces could also examine their policies, processes, IT and systems with a view to reducing the number of incidents that are incorrectly recorded as crimes and eliminating sources of duplication. In particular, there appeared to be a culture of early recording in some forces as opposed to undertaking appropriate enquiries and investigation prior to recording. Research participants also offered numerous examples of the collection of information being process or system, as opposed to outcome, driven.

Implications for force initiatives on crime recording

There are various options for introducing changes to the crime recording process. Some options would involve fairly straightforward and discrete changes to policies and systems; others would involve a more in-depth focus on established operational cultures relating to performance and aversion to risk. A potential difficulty in designing initiatives to improve the crime recording process is the tendency for the various explanatory themes to operate simultaneously. For example, performance management driven by numerical targets has a tendency to subvert other processes and create perverse and unintended outcomes. It may be that it is much easier to diagnose areas where there is a problem with, for example, knowledge and interpretation of the NCRS and HOCR once performance pressures have been removed. Similarly, it may be necessary to remove performance pressures in order to more easily diagnose a risk-averse attitude to external audit, or an internal culture of pedantry in relation to data quality and compliance.

Forces could, in the short to medium term:

- Identify which specific crime types result in the highest volume and proportion of reclassifications and/or no-crimes to inform action to address perceived unnecessary work. It may be possible to examine and revise protocols for evidence gathering (at both call handling and attending officer stages) to focus on key information requirements.

- Clarify within force what is acceptable in terms of 'credible evidence to the contrary' and 'additional verifiable information' and ensure that the level of evidence corresponds with requirements for external audit.

- Examine internal processes for creating and updating crime reports to identify blockages or sources of duplication and delay.

- Attempt to identify changes to IT and systems that allow for more streamlined data collection and management.

- Leave some crimes on command and control systems as opposed to duplicating the details to crime systems. This solution would be problematic only if recording on a crime system influenced the level of service provided (such as a response from a specialist team) or if intelligence from command and control systems was not brought to bear on patterns of crime analysis.

- Give a crime report a status of 'pending' or 'awaiting confirmation' in order to remove the need for no-criming should an offence later be deemed not to have occurred.

- Focus internal audit on crime recording and proportionate investigation, as opposed to accuracy of classification, in line with current HMIC inspection criteria.

Although the suggestions above could perhaps be done in isolation, other potential solutions to disproportionate activity in crime recording involve culture change. Effecting culture change is notoriously difficult, especially when cultures such as those surrounding performance and risk-aversion have become established. In this sense, force initiatives around crime recording may be most likely to succeed if embedded in wider work concerning greater use of

professional judgement and application of the principles of the national decision-making model. In the medium to long term, forces could:

- Address the culture of risk-aversion that appears to have developed around crime recording and take a more proportionate approach to all aspects of the process.

- Look to improve frontline officers' knowledge and understanding of the NCRS and the HOCR; in particular, officers should be clear about whether and when to record an incident as a crime.

- Encourage greater use of professional judgement in relation to all aspects of the crime recording process and in particular around what constitutes 'credible evidence to the contrary' and 'additional verifiable information'.

- Move away from target-driven performance management of specific crimes types, and detections for low-level offences, to focus more on demand reduction and problem-solving.

- Reduce internal audit activity commensurate with improvements in officers' knowledge of NCRS and HOCR and in line with both current national inspection criteria and any reduced emphasis on performance targets.

Appendix: Research methods

The research began with a review of key background documents, including:

- National Crime Recording Standard.

- Home Office Counting Rules.

- Flanagan Review of Policing.

- Reducing Bureaucracy in Policing Full Report.

- HMIC 'Cutting the Blue Tape' report.

- Force policies/guidance.

Sampling

A purposive sample of forces was selected in order to ensure a range of different practitioner experiences were covered. Key factors considered in relation to identifying forces were:

- The type of IT system used to record crime.

- Whether the current crime recording system was linked to a command and control system.

- Whether the force had a central crime bureau.

- The size of the force.

- Whether the force had independently sought to use proportionality and professional judgement in relation to crime recording.

Seven forces participated in the research. There was a reasonable geographic spread: two were large northern forces, one a midlands force, four forces were from the south and south east. There was one Metropolitan Police borough. Three forces covered large urban areas; the others were either rural or mixed.

Data collection

Data collection took place between April and May 2011. Data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Each interview

and focus group was led by an RAI researcher, alongside either one or two serving police officers who had been identified as subject specialists through the ACPO Reducing Bureaucracy Practitioners' Group. The role of the researcher was to lead the interviews and focus groups, ensuring the quality of the data collection. The role of the police officers was to use expert knowledge to probe interviewees around policies and practices in relation to specific aspects of the crime recording process. The use of both social researchers and police officers was beneficial: officers were adept at understanding the specific context for crime recording and the strengths and weaknesses of force processes, whilst researchers brought objectivity and a focus on methodological rigour.

A total of thirty police officers and staff involved in the classification or audit of crime were interviewed as part of the research. Interviewees included force crime registrars, audit staff, crime managers. Four of the interviews were with senior officers at Chief Superintendent or Superintendent rank with supervisory responsibilities for crime recording and performance management. A focus group was conducted in each participating force with frontline officers from response, neighbourhood teams, and CID, totalling forty-nine officers. In addition, in-depth interviews were undertaken with two key national stakeholders: the National Crime Registrar and a representative of HMIC.

Both researchers and police officers took detailed notes during interviews and focus groups. These notes were written up independently and subsequently combined to form a record of the fieldwork site visit.

Data analysis and interpretation

Data analysis was undertaken using a framework method: detailed fieldwork notes were summarised under themes to give an indication of the range of opinions within and between forces. Using the framework, it was possible to assess the number of respondents who stated a particular opinion, and how strongly the opinion was expressed across respondents.

During the analysis process, RAI sought to interpret and reconcile findings relating to key themes where the opinions of key stakeholders appeared to diverge. In particular, RAI sought to reconcile and explain where, for example, the perceptions of frontline officers appeared to differ from those of supervisors,

or the dominant perceptions across forces appeared to differ to those of key national stakeholders.

To validate the data analysis and interpretation of findings, RAI held an analysis workshop with the research team, the police officers who assisted with the research, and the National Crime Registrar. In addition, further meetings were held with HMIC and the National Crime Registrar to help contextualise the findings from a national perspective.

The findings are not intended to be representative of all forces, but do outline common themes that may impact on all English and Welsh forces.