

How police officers spend their time: two-force snapshot

Evidence on how police officers spend their time is scarce. The research reported here involved independent observation and recording of 194 shifts of uniformed police officers in neighbourhood or response teams in two forces during June and July 2010.

Findings

- Public-facing work accounted for approximately 44% of the officers' time, including responding to incidents and taking statements, foot patrol and community engagement.
- On average, officers observed appeared to spend a similar proportion of time outside the station (56%) as in previous officer-completed activity analysis.
- Of time outside the station, neighbourhood officers spent most (53%) on community work including foot patrol, while response officers spent most (39%) dealing with incidents.
- Observers noted at least one efficiency issue in 56% of shifts, more on response than on neighbourhood shifts.
- Despite response officers' descriptions of being extremely busy at peak times, no evidence was found of more time spent on incidents on peak shifts.
- Efficiency issues related to dealing with incidents frequently involved multiple units responding to an incident or arriving and finding no incident,
- The proportion of single crewed shifts compared to double crewed (officers in pairs) appeared higher than in previous studies.
- The observed time spent inside following arrest (just under 2.5 hours) appeared shorter compared to the average time (3.5 hours) from a previous study of officer use of time.
- Across roles and shifts, 27% of shift time was spent inside on administrative tasks including case file building, typically at the beginning and end of a shift.

Emerging issues and opportunities for change

- The response function appears to have greatest scope for improvement, particularly with regard to resourcing and demand management.
- Technology was thought to have potential to greatly improve efficiency, particularly through mobile devices and greater compatibility of systems.
- Improvements in administration systems and support also have potential to remove some minor but persistent frustrations. The consistency of time spent on administration suggests officer habits are also worthy of investigation for efficiency gains.
- Neighbourhood officers highlighted visibility as key to being effective, but could be more aware of the potential benefit of wider engagement activity.
- The research has been welcomed by the participating forces, one of whom has used the key themes to establish how they might best improve visibility and operational effectiveness in the development and design of their force plans over the coming months.
- Other forces could compare their experience using tools and techniques on POLKA to diagnose whether they might have potential for greater efficiency.
- Increased risk assessment may have balanced out the impact of reducing officers' time inside on administration through workforce changes. Ensuring proportionate risk assessment is a theme which is being addressed by the ACPO reducing bureaucracy programme.