

# New Recruits in the Police: Summary

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## Key Findings

1. The recruits in this study brought with them a breadth of experience in terms of age, education and prior work experience - including former PCSOs, special constables, and recruits from other occupations - that gave them specific skills and informed their attitudes and beliefs in ways that are useful for the service. Following the introduction of the Police Education Qualifications Framework (PEQF) by January 2020, such diversity of experience may become less possible and is something that police managers will need to watch.
2. Many recruits claimed that they came to the job already having values and beliefs that aligned with the College of Policing Code of Ethics. In particular, many emphasised the importance of honesty and integrity. The recruits saw evidence of police ethics and integrity in action, both in training and on division - although on division things were “more relaxed”.
3. Empathy was seen as a vital element of policing - a sort of ‘empathetic policing’ that could be promoted across the service - where officers try to see things from the others’ perspective, be they victim, accused, or someone else. After six months on the job, some found it difficult to empathise with repeat calls for service and a few thought some senior colleagues were losing their ability to empathise; yet most saw empathy as essential.
4. Most enjoyed the training and the practical work on division. Recruits had been taken on as either Early Action or immediate response officers. However, due to unforeseen deployment issues, many Early Action recruits were redeployed to immediate response. For some recruits, poor or late communication of redeployment was an issue, and a few felt the details of what it meant to be an Early Action officer remained imprecise. It was recognised that change may be unavoidable - but it is a question of how this is handled and communicated.
5. Before joining, many recruits thought the police were crime fighters. After they joined, views on police roles expanded to include various social service and peace keeping functions, with particular emphases on mental health issues and vulnerable people. Consideration is needed regarding the suitability of roles and specific skills required for such work.
6. A few recruits identified cynicism and the cliquy qualities of some colleagues, especially towards the Early Action recruits. Empathy was seen as a brake on cynicism. That said, in general, the recruits’ perceptions of ‘police culture’ appeared to challenge dominant narratives as they felt they were part of a police ‘family’, they were well-supported and observed colleagues acting professionally.

## Background

Police culture has been described as the “informal occupational norms and values operating under the apparently rigid hierarchical structure of police organisations” (Chan, 1996:110). It is debatable whether there is a single ‘police culture’, with variation both between and within forces; yet, for good or ill, there are dominant police practices or cultures that, despite the best efforts of police reformers, are often resistant to

change. Such practices have been labelled a 'cop culture' code of ethics (Reiner, 2010) featuring a sense of mission, cynicism and pessimism, suspicion of others, and solidarity. Alternatively, in 2014 the College of Policing introduced its own Code of Ethics for policing, which emphasised nine principles of accountability, fairness, honesty, integrity, leadership, objectivity, openness, respect and selflessness.

There is a long history of research on police culture, but few studies have focused on the experiences of new recruits. Notable exceptions are Fielding (1988), Chan (2001) and Charman (2017). This study adds to this by investigating the extent to which the attitudes, values and beliefs of new recruits to Lancashire Constabulary reinforce the assumed dominant culture, or mirror the Code of Ethics and challenge historic norms and practices. The study considers the recruits' attitudes, values and beliefs - and experiences - over their first six months in post. The project built on previous work for Lancashire Constabulary on police volunteering by one of the authors (Millie, 2016).

### **Aims of this study**

The aims of the study were to investigate:

- new recruits' prior experiences and motivations for joining the police;
- the extent to which new recruits bring with them attitudes, values and beliefs - and expectations - that reinforce or challenge dominant police cultures;
- the impressions and experiences that new recruits have of the police; and
- new recruits' perceptions of police roles and police culture.

### **Methods**

The research involved two rounds of semi-structured interviews with new recruits in Lancashire Constabulary. In the first instance, 60 recruits were interviewed during their first few weeks of training in November 2016. Two-thirds of these (respondents 1-40) had been recruited as Early Action officers dedicated to prevention and diversion operations, whilst a third (respondents 41-60) were recruited to immediate response. In May and June 2017 as many as possible were re-interviewed, resulting in a further 49 interviews - again including two-thirds that had been recruited to Early Action (n=33) and a third that had been recruited to immediate response (n=16). The project adhered to the British Society of Criminology code of ethics and received ethical approval from Edge Hill University. All 109 interviews were transcribed and analysed, identifying key and emerging themes. The result was a unique dataset giving insight into the attitudes, values and beliefs of new recruits.

### **Prior experience and reasons for joining**

Three-quarters of the recruits had previously worked for the police as a Police Community Support Officer (PCSO) or volunteered as a special constable. Many had positive experiences working or volunteering for the police and wanted to take this forward. The rest of the recruits had a variety of previous occupations, including work with vulnerable people, mental health work, work with the Troubled Families Programme, teaching, work for the ambulance service or the National Probation Service. This breadth of experience included many whose work may have given them specific skills and informed their attitudes and beliefs in ways that are useful for the service. This variety of experience was reflected in the age of the recruits, which ranged from those in their 20s to some in their 50s, and there was a mix with and without degree education. This variety was appreciated by a male recruit to Early Action:

...the class I'm in, is, is a broad spectrum aged from 23 to 53. Everybody - and we've got people from civilian walks of life, people who've been Specials, people have been PCSOs [...] a lot of us are parents and have got family backgrounds, and suchlike, and worked in a variety of roles, [...] I can see why we're all here, why people have been picked for this job, because everybody has great communication skills, er, great use of empathy, great listening skills, which is also good. (26EA-M)

Given the introduction of the Police Education Qualifications Framework (PEQF) by January 2020, and the push for graduate entry or degree apprenticeships, this diversity of experience may become less possible in the future and is something that police managers will need to watch. In terms of gender, 60% of recruits were male and 40% female, which compared to the 2011 Census figure for Lancashire of 49% male and 51% female. On the whole, the recruits matched the 2011 Census ethnic profile for the county, which was 90% White British. Many recruits had longstanding interest in joining the police and/or had family members within the service. Reasons for joining centred on a desire to help people, and to have a unique working environment. Whilst there was some concern regarding the allocation of roles - whether Early Action or immediate response - most recruits were enthusiastic to be working for the police, in whatever capacity.

### **Personal values and beliefs**

Many recruits claimed they came to the job already having values and beliefs that aligned with the College of Policing Code of Ethics. In particular, many emphasised the importance of having honesty and integrity; as a female recruit to Early Action put it, "I think if you're a police officer, if you're dishonest then you, you shouldn't be in the job" (13EA-F). For some recruits their values were influenced by religious belief, for others it was a belief that everyone is worthy of respect, often expressed in terms of the golden rule - a maxim that exists across many religions and philosophies, that one should "always treat people as you wish to be treated" (16EA-F). For instance, according to a female recruit to Early Action:

...you're not going to be dealing with the easiest of people, and I understand that. [...] But, at the end of the day, they still deserve respect, they're still a human being and you treat people how you would expect to be treated, er, regardless of what they've done. (36EA-F)

Many could see how their personal values and beliefs would influence the way they policed. Empathy was seen as an essential element of policing - a sort of 'empathetic policing' where officers try to see things from the others' perspective, be they victim, accused, or someone else. As a male recruit to immediate response put it, "it's really important to, to put yourselves in other people's shoes and understand, because people are going to have issues" (53IR-M). After six months on the job empathy was still seen as important, yet some recruits were finding it increasingly difficult to empathise in all situations. For instance, a male recruit to immediate response found it difficult to empathise with some repeat calls for service:

...with some incidents that you go to, time and time again, erm, I think domestics being one of them, especially if they're the same couple that ring up every single day, or every single week, it's sometimes quite hard then to empathise with them. (44IR-M)

A few recruits were of the view that some more senior colleague were losing their ability to empathise, that "empathy does eventually leave your system" (05EA-M); and they were worried that they would end up the same. Police training often refers to the need to consider police ethics and integrity. Despite the possibility that some senior colleagues may be less empathetic, the recruits saw evidence of police ethics and integrity in action - although on division a female recruit to immediate response observed, "I'm not saying people don't still act, you know, with ethics, [...] of course they do. But it's far more relaxed". (54IR-F)

### **Experience of policing**

The diverse nature of the intake of policing recruits has already been noted. Some of the older recruits that had been out of education for some time found the class-based learning a challenge, yet they brought with them a wealth of experience that benefitted the rest of the class. There were some concerns among the recruits, in particular regarding poor communication. For instance, some felt that the details of what it meant to be an Early Action officer remained imprecise. Furthermore, whilst it was appreciated that the service may need to redeploy officers, some felt that this could be "a bit late notice". According to a female recruit to Early Action:

...it's a bit late notice just a week before being like, 'Right, you're back on IR'. And I know - I know you're right in saying you have to be flexible, but [...] we're not just numbers, we're actually people and we do have lives, and we have plans in place. (14EA-F)

For a few recruits, operational changes could contribute to stress levels. Change may be unavoidable, but it is a question of how it is handled and communicated. The recruits recognised that the job could have a negative impact on family life, especially the result of shift patterns - although paradoxically, for some the shifts benefitted family life by providing time with children during the day. Some had concerns regarding computer systems, and one recruit had a specific problem feeling undermined by colleagues. That said, most recruits enjoyed the training as well as the more practical work on division - as a male recruit to immediate response stated, "...for the first time ever I think I've enjoyed actually coming to work" (60IR-M).

### **Perceptions of police roles and culture**

Recruits generally came to the service with positive impressions of the police. When their impressions were negative, this was often due to poor interactions with individual officers. Before joining, many recruits thought the police were crime fighters, there to make arrests, to protect and serve the community and react to crime. Once they joined, the recruits' perspectives on the role of the police expanded to include various social service and peace keeping functions, with particular emphases on work involving mental health issues and vulnerable people. For instance, a female recruit to Early Action recognised a "...lack of services and funding in other places, and the police kind of pick up everyone else's jobs, really. It's about vulnerable people and I think it's about more prevention now than reacting to things". (11EA-F). Consideration is needed regarding the suitability of roles and specific skills required for such work.

A few recruits identified cynicism amongst older officers and the cliquy qualities of some colleagues, especially towards the Early Action recruits. For instance, one female recruit saw her position as an Early Action officer as "quite isolating" at times and perceived some immediate response officers as "very sort of cliquy". This made it "hard to sort of come into and try and get into that team when you're new and Early Action". (04EA-F) Empathy was seen as a brake on cynicism. That said, in general, the recruits' perceptions of 'police culture' appear to challenge dominant narratives of police working environments. The recruits felt they were part of a police 'family', they were well-supported and observed colleagues acting professionally.

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