CEP 2019 ELECTION ANALYSES SERIES

A series of background briefings on the policy issues in the December 2019 UK General Election

Policing and Crime

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Policing and Crime

CEP ELECTION ANALYSIS

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- Policing and crime have quickly moved up the list of electoral concerns, with crime being ranked the third most important issue behind Brexit and the NHS in a recent public survey.

- All three main parties have pledged to invest in policing, promising to hire around 20,000 additional police officers. This will be difficult to achieve and is likely to put considerable strain on police forces to deliver on that target.

- If this recruitment occurs, it will end a long period of austerity including budget cuts in policing that has considerably reduced the size of UK forces, hitting forces outside London particularly hard.

- As austerity bit and budget cuts were implemented, violent crime rose in England and Wales after decades of falls. Rising knife crime is particularly prominent.

- If deployed efficiently, there is scope for the additional officers to reduce crime. The effect may vary across places, as larger cities are more difficult to police.

- Consideration needs to be given to the overall operations of the criminal justice system, in particular if and how it would be able to deal with the extra workload generated by additional police officers.

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Introduction

A long period of austerity and budget cuts in policing that started when Theresa May became Home Secretary may be coming to an end. As austerity bit and budget cuts were implemented, this considerably reduced the size of UK forces and their ability to fight crime.

But as violent crime has started to go back up over the past few years, so have voter concerns. According to a YouGov poll on 7 November 2019, crime is now ranked third in the list of issues facing the country, behind Brexit and the NHS. All three main parties have announced plans for investment in new police officers.

The legacy of austerity for policing

As Figure 1 shows, police officer and police staff numbers have fallen quite dramatically since 2010. Cuts were particularly heavy for forces outside London. From a peak of 146,000 police officers and 81,000 police staff in 2010, numbers reduced to 126,000 and 66,000 respectively. This is a loss of about 20,000 officers and 15,000 police staff. Over the same period, between 400 and 600 police stations closed (estimates by the House of Commons library), as did numerous youth centres and other services.

Figure 1: Police officer and staff numbers in England and Wales
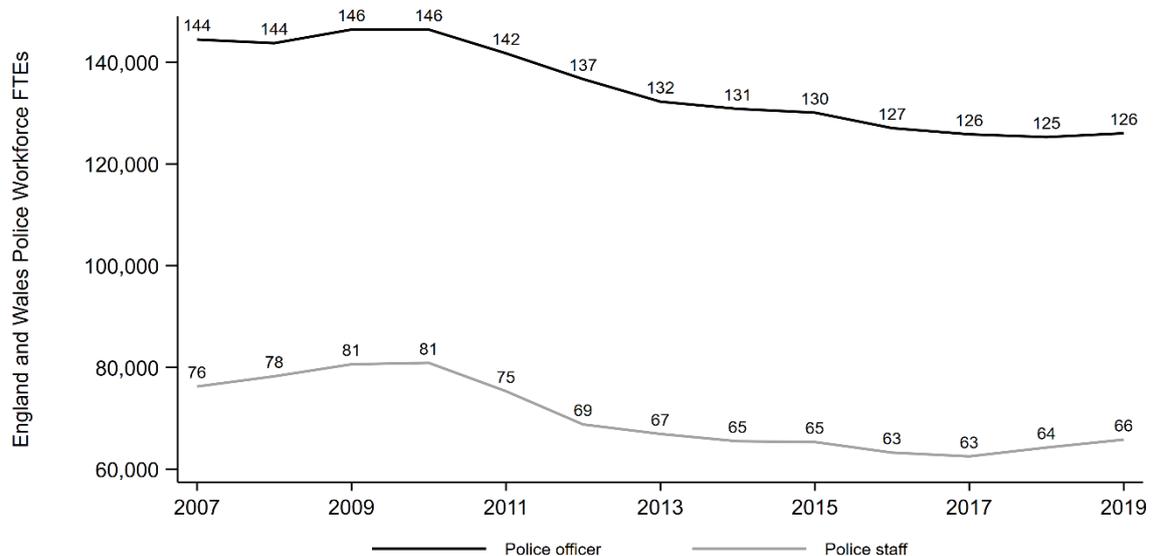
Note: All dates are as of 31 March 2019.
Source: Data from Home Office.

Clearly, it is a positive signal that all parties have pledged to bring officer numbers back up to 2010 levels, with the Conservatives promising to hire 20,000 additional officers, Labour 22,000 and the Liberal Democrats 20,000 (with an associated 2% pay increase).

Efficient modern policing, however, requires much more than the 'bobby on the street'. It needs modern equipment, sophisticated technical capabilities and front-line police officers effectively directed by back office staff. The public also expects efficient communication by the police service with the people it serves. A simple focus on officers might not be enough to address the additional resources needed by the entire policing 'ecosystem'.

Moreover, another challenge is that a wave of retirements will shortly 'hit' the police service: 23,000 officers are expected to retire or leave the service over the next three years. Given that all parties have pledged around 20,000 new officers, this implies that the service would have to recruit and train up around 43,000 new officers in a very short time period, a truly herculean task.

It is unclear if the services will have the capabilities to do that, especially considering that there has been a hiring freeze in place for almost a decade, resulting in considerable reductions in the capacity to recruit and train new officers.

The return of violent crime

Figure 2 shows changes in violent crime in England and Wales since 1990. It was falling for a long period, but more recently as austerity bit and budget cuts occurred, violent crime has risen.

Figure 2: Crime in England and Wales
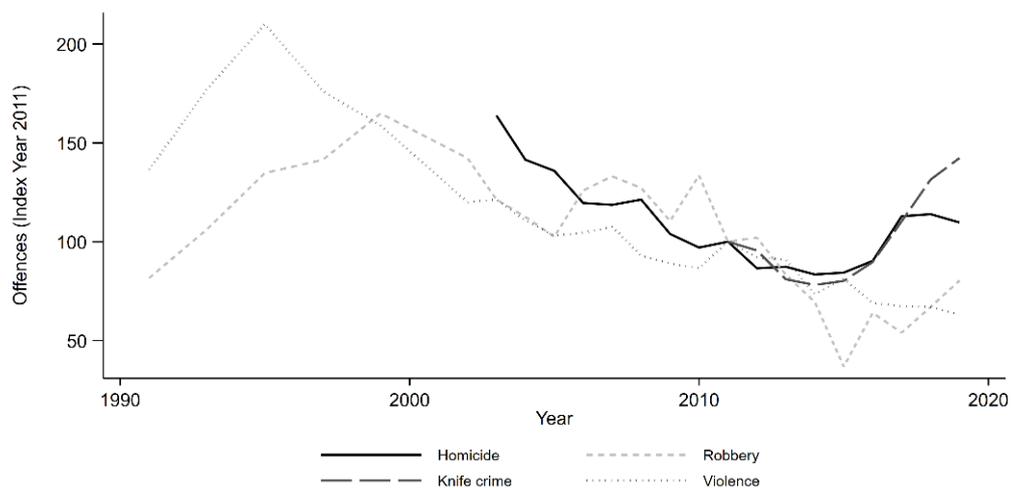
Source: Data from ONS.

Figure 2 shows the recent increase in the murder rate, now at its highest for ten years. Rising knife crime is particularly prominent. Knives, and other sharp instruments, are used in about 40% of all murders. Most of these are male-on-male incidents. London is the area with the highest rate of knife crime, as Figure 3 shows.
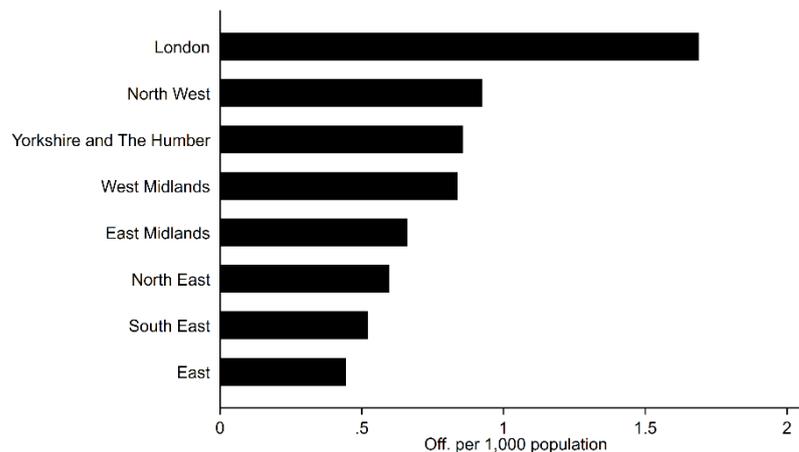
The second most common cause of murders is associated with domestic abuse cases. In the UK, more than two women a week are killed in a domestic abuse case.

Figure 3: Number of murders per year and gender in England and Wales
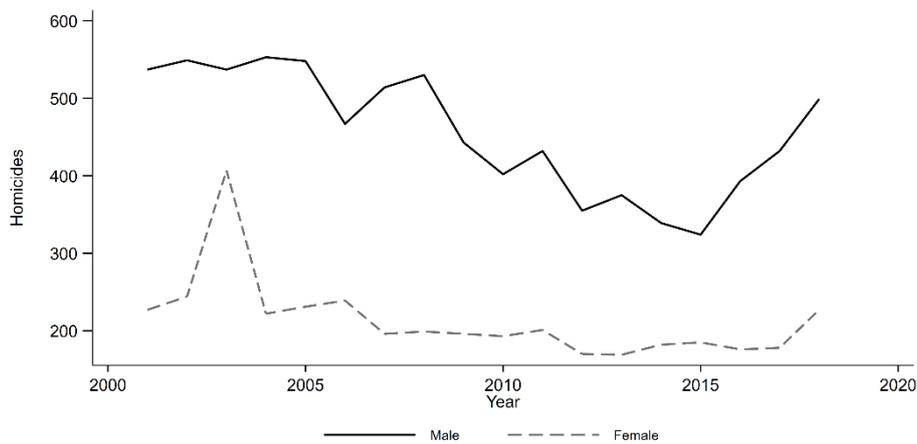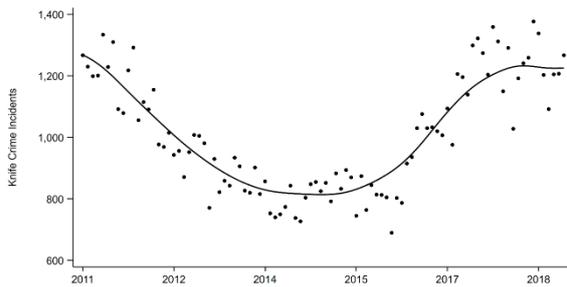

Source: Data from ONS.

**Figure 4: Knife crime rates by area**
April 2018 to March 2019

Source: Data from ONS.

Figure 4 shows knife crime rates by area of the country; Figures 5 and 6 show the monthly data for knife crimes in London. The first depicts all cases where a knife was involved or found, with the second showing only the cases in which someone was injured. Figure 5 shows that there was a turning point around 2015 when levels of knife crime started to rise, that the overall level of knife crimes has recently flattened out, with Figure 6 showing that the number of knife crimes involving injury has fallen (Kirchmaier et al 2019a).

Figure 5:
Knife crime in London

Figure 6:
Knife crime with injury in London
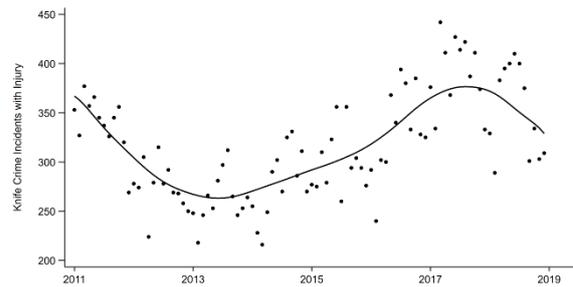

Source: Data from Metropolitan Police Service.

Increasing police numbers

A body of academic research shows that if deployed well, more police can reduce crime (Bindler et al, 2018; Di Tella and Schargrodsky, 2004; Draca et al, 2011; Levitt, 1997). This is in line with the intuition of the general public that police presence matters in deterring crime and keeping people safe. It seems reasonable that if deployed efficiently and if the police are able to recruit the stated numbers, then levels of crime could be brought down. Unfortunately, both are significant 'ifs'.

The debate on police officers overlooks the fact that the entire criminal justice system needs additional resources. More officers will create more work for the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), and it is unclear that the CPS will be able to deal with the additional workload. The same argument then applies to the courts and prisons in turn.

The perception of safety is important in generating economic activity, and hence generating the taxes that keep society going. It is a fact of life that cities are more productive, and London particularly so. But it is also true that larger cities have more crime, and more serious crime. To take just one example, Figure 7 illustrates the relationship between homicides and population in England and Wales by police force area (Kirchmaier et al 2019b).

Figure 7: Homicides and city size
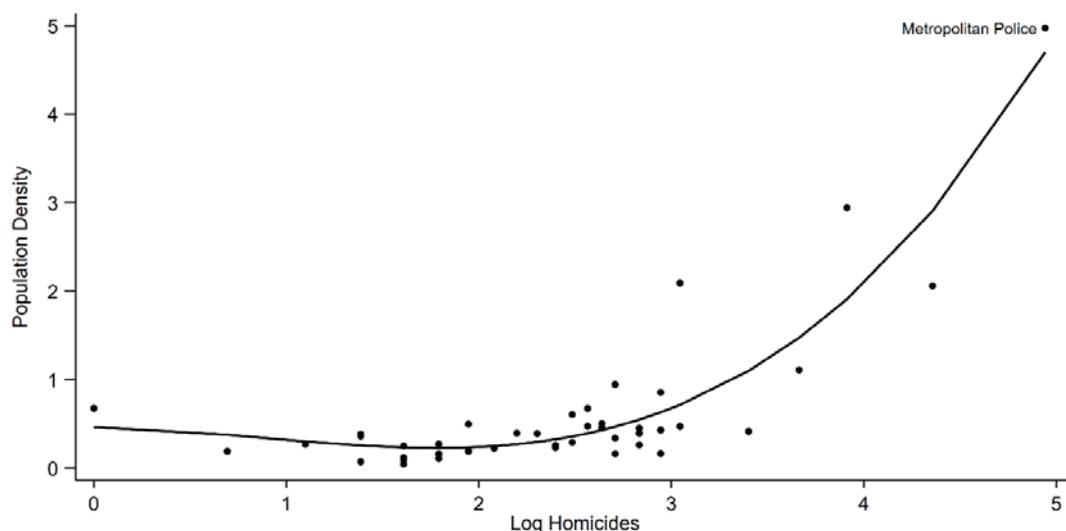
Source: Data from ONS.

Evidence-based policing

In recent years, the large urban police forces have made substantial progress in setting up 'evidence-based policing' (EBP) groups, and working much more closely with university researchers. This allows forces to gain important insight into operational (in)efficiencies, to analyse crime patterns and to base their decisions on more scientific methods.

The issue is that many smaller forces do not seem to have sufficient resources or technical capabilities to engage in EBP. Relatively cheap investment in back office systems could help forces to reap the benefits from 'big data' and improved analysis.

Final words

Voter preferences on policing and crime have changed, and so have the pledges of the political parties about staffing, which have all promised about 20,000 new police officers over the next three years. The underlying driver is steep rises in violent crimes after decades of falling crime numbers.

While additional resources for policing are undoubtedly positive news, and they would help to reduce crime levels if deployed efficiently, questions remain about whether forces will be able to recruit and train considerable number of new officers, in particular as a retirement wave will hit the forces at the same time. Some of these resources might in fact be better used in improving back office functionality and modernising the force and updating the skills of its staff.

We also need to consider that policing is just one part of the criminal justice system, which will need strengthening across the entire system should the new officers be expected to make a difference.

Further reading

Bindler, A, and R Hjalmarsson (2018) 'The Impact of the First Professional Police Forces on Crime', working paper.

Di Tella, R, and E Schargrodsky (2004) 'Do Police Reduce Crime? Estimates Using the Allocation of Police Forces After a Terrorist Attack', *American Economic Review* 94(1): 115-33.

Draca, M, S Machin and R Witt (2011) 'Panic on the streets of London: Police, crime, and the July 2005 terror attacks', *American Economic Review* 101(5): 2157-81.

Kirchmaier, T, S Machin and C Villa-Llera (2019a) 'Gangs, drugs, and knife crime in London', CEP mimeo.

Kirchmaier, T, and R Ivandic (2019b) 'Monetary Value of a Safe City', CEP mimeo.

Levitt, S (1997) 'Using electoral cycles in police hiring to estimate the effect of police on crime', *American Economic Review* 87: 270-90.

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