Evaluating the crime desk and its role as investigator

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Abstract This paper addresses key issues in the implementation of a managed response to crime. Based on a major study of resource allocation decision-making procedures in the British Police Service, it focuses on the “crime desk”, both as an aid to management and as an operational centre for new forms of investigation. While the authors found a clear indication that crime desks brought benefits by alleviating the administrative burden imposed by the crime recording process, evidence that their potential as an investigative resource was less clear. However, they produce a strong argument that this could be amended if key issues are understood and addressed by the police service.

Introduction
In the face of spiralling costs, rapidly increasing crime rates (Audit Commission, 1993)[1] and reduced public confidence (MORI 1994, p. 7), the 1980s and 1990s saw a marked increase in demand for improved accountability and efficiency in the police service. Influential publications such as the Home Office Circulars 114/83 and 106/88, the Sheehy Report in 1993, Audit Commission Paper No. 12 (1993) and the government White Paper A Police Service for the 21st Century all urged the police to adopt management theories and practices more usually implemented within the private sector. The result was a definite trend towards the development of a “new managerialism” in public sector policing:

The quest for efficiency within the service is a comparatively new idea, notions of resource allocations and effective management are revolutionary to a service that has previously not had to count the cost. External calls for the service to be accountable and cost-effective have forced management theories into a previously lavish culture which pursued criminals without counting the cost.

In response to these new demands, a number of forces experimented with a range of initiatives in the area of crime management. In the absence of a national policy, they sought their own solutions and several introduced what are generically referred to as “crime desks”. Although various types of crime desk exist, all have the common purpose of facilitating various essential crime management tasks. One of the most important of these is deciding which police resources should be allocated to individual incidents of certain offences.

In 1993, the present authors were commissioned by the Home Office Police Research Group to conduct research on so-called “crime screening”. This practice was felt to be one of the principal crime allocation decision-making systems and the authors’ research was the first national study of it. The role of the crime desk and its personnel in enabling and even conducting
investigations emerged as a fundamental issue in the area of crime management. This paper explores the role of the crime desk within the investigative process and evaluates its success within the crime management system.

Methodology
Following a preliminary literature review which included access to internal police documents, a short postal questionnaire was sent to all 43 police forces in England and Wales. Among other things, this asked each force whether they employed any form of crime screening as a matter of policy and, if so, how this worked. On the basis of the 100 per cent response rate, researchers then selected nine police forces for further research. These were chosen to represent regional and demographic variables, force strength, levels of reported crime and the presence of special initiatives of particular interest to the project aims.

A research team then visited each force in turn for periods of approximately three days and spent time in at least two sub-divisions, also selected to represent the internal variables of crime levels, demography and to reflect a balance between urban and rural characteristics. This phase of the research also included an ethnographic element in which researchers observed crime desk and control room activity and accompanied operational officers while they performed relevant investigative tasks. The final phase of the research consisted of 655 semi-structured interviews with operational police officers who had conducted enquiries into incidents of burglary and auto crime during the previous six months (three months regarding auto crime).

The research findings revealed the crime desk to have a major role at various stages in the investigative process although the way this was defined from one force to the next varied considerably. This variation emerged to be a function of individual force interpretation of what a crime desk should aim to achieve in response to local crime conditions and the availability of police resources.

The role of the crime desk
Crime desks developed in a largely ad hoc fashion with forces experimenting with individual solutions which were, in some cases, adopted as best practice by other forces. The Audit Commission subsequently identified crime desks as both an illustration of effective crime management and the means by which it could be achieved (1994, p. 47):

Effective crime management requires an appropriate and efficient initial response; prompt identification of cases meriting further investigation by detectives; integration of investigation, intelligence and scientific support inputs; and a high quality of communication with victims of crime. This represents a substantial task of co-ordination and progress monitoring, and a number of forces have adopted the crime desk mechanism to undertake it.

It is necessary to consider these roles in a little more detail in order to understand their practical implementation. First, crime desks aim to streamline crime reporting by providing a high grade and cost-effective alternative to
officers visiting crime scenes in cases where their presence is unlikely to add value to the police response. A good example would be a case of car theft from an unsupervised city centre car park. Unless the offender leaves personal belongings behind or if the scene is over-looked by a building from where the offence may be observed then all a police officer can do is record the offence and the victim’s details in the form of a crime report. The theory of the crime desk is that this task can be done just as effectively by telephone contact with specifically designated personnel. This liberates patrol officers to concentrate on incidents where their attendance is considered crucial and cuts down the number of calls to busy control rooms.

Second, crime desks can also assist further resource allocation by checking and analysing all completed crime reports. Their quality assurance role liberates sergeants and other supervisors from the chore of checking scores of reports and allows them to dedicate themselves to overseeing ongoing investigations. Report analysis identifies solvability factors and ensures that crimes that are unlikely to benefit from attention by detectives are allocated either to local beat officers or filed pending further information. This helps preserve CID expertise for incidents where it is most needed.

Third, this analysis creates the opportunity for an intelligence role as reports can be checked for patterns of offending. This can be developed into a form of “further investigation” by incorporating information from other sources to inform future operations. It also enables investigations to continue after operational officers have completed their enquiries and can help ensure that cases do not simply get “filed and forgotten”.

Finally, crime desks can improve on the quality of victim support provided by officers who visit the scene because they are not under the same pressure to respond to other incidents and can therefore devote more time to the victim. The crime desk also provides a central information source from which victims can enquire about the progress of their case, and through the issue of a “crime number”, helps speed up insurance claims. The crime desk can also be used as a “help line” to provide an advisory service about other, non-crime related matters.

The Audit Commission view of a crime desk is, however, based on a retrospectively formulated ideal. Whilst some forces have introduced crime desks in line with this model, a great many already had them in place by the time the report was published. As a result the degree to which crime desks conform to the Audit Commission’s ideal varies considerably. The authors’ national research revealed that the extent to which individual crime desks fulfil each of the above roles varies according to a range of factors, and these will be examined in turn.

**Evaluating the crime desk**

One of the first research findings to emerge was that the principal objective of the crime desk varied markedly between forces. Some focused on alleviating the control room by receiving calls from the public, although others did not deal
directly with the public at all. Yet others concentrated on checking the quality of crime reports but had no formal system of collating information for intelligence purposes, whilst in some forces this was the primary objective. Moreover, there were significant variations in approach and attitude within many individual forces. In one case, a crime desk in one city was highly respected for its contribution to “batch” investigations by operational officers while another just a few miles away was considered nothing more than a “crime recording bureau” and something of a waste of resources by many operational officers. To evaluate crime desks with any coherence, therefore, it is necessary to do so in respect of the various roles they might reasonably be expected to fulfil.

Providing the initial response to complaints of crime
Prior to the introduction of crime desks in some forces, control room personnel often completed crime reports by questioning victims at the point when they first telephoned the police. This became necessary during periods when no patrol officers were available to attend the scene. Although it provided a stop-gap solution, this occasional practice was clearly inadequate in the long term. Control room staff respond to myriad telephone calls and radio communications and any delays or “bottle-necks” can cause serious problems for officers on the ground. Additionally, completing the crime report requires a satisfactory form of initial investigation, whether by telephone or otherwise, and control rooms cannot afford the time to ask complainants too many questions without neglecting their primary role as communicators.

Ascertaining crime desks’ effectiveness at relieving control rooms from taking crime complaints over the telephone is relatively simple. A previous study of a “crime line” (Read and Jolowicz, 1993) found that just under 10,000 crime reports per year were diverted from the control room and the time taken to complete them was cut by half. Preparatory research in another regional force calculated that control room staff would complete up to 18,000 crime reports per year. Clearly, transferring such calls to a dedicated resource inevitably saves a great deal of time and allows control rooms to continue with their designated tasks.

However, things are not so simple. The authors’ systems analysis of incident reporting procedures revealed that all investigations begin at the instant the police receive a crime complaint. The implication of this is to participate in the “reporting” stage of a crime or even conduct the “initial investigation” therefore whoever responds to a crime complaint, whether by telephone or otherwise, fulfils the role of “first officer at the scene”. Measuring the ability of crime desk personnel to conduct investigations by telephone is problematic as the information included in police records is insufficiently detailed for this purpose. For example, with only one exception, no forces kept records to measure whether unattended (“screened out”) incidents were re-activated on the basis of crime desk analyses or “static investigations” and what results such actions achieved. For the most part, crime desks were neither regulated nor evaluated
in terms of their initial investigative function. This suggests that while they may be successful in relieving officers of the administrative burden of participation in the recording process, it is difficult to measure crime desks’ performance as providers of an investigative response. Confining crime desk activities to crime recording amounts to little more than “crime accounting” and seriously limits its potential within an integrated crime management structure.

It is extremely unlikely, however, that crime desk officers might achieve a detection on the basis of a telephone call alone. However, they may be able to gather sufficient information to justify further enquiries once a pattern has been established. If officers conducting such a subsequent enquiry were to make an arrest, then part of the credit for the investigation should belong to the crime desk. But this is quite an advanced scenario, the reality in many crime desks is that most crime reports are filed or stored on computer without being subject to any serious attempt at analysis. Where this is true, it confirms critics’ worst fears as it amounts to a de-emphasis of minor crime.

Research revealed that this problem was most evident in small crime desks which did not incorporate formal analytical and investigative components. Without these their investigative capability beyond the initial “reporting” phase is drastically curtailed. Such crime desks may provide a valuable service by providing lists of undetected offences which are similar to those for which a suspect has been arrested. However, while this facilitates the detection of offences to be “taken into consideration” (TICs) and others detected as a result of post conviction confessions (“prison visits”), it does little to maximise the full potential of what could be a productive investigative resource in its own right.

In spite of these limitations, crime desks were judged by many officers to provide a beneficial service in facilitating the reporting of crime. Most agreed that the crime desks provide greater convenience for the public, as victims no longer had to wait for officers to arrive at the scene, or visit the police station to report crimes. There was also widespread acknowledgement that crime desks liberate patrol officers to attend more urgent incidents. Indeed, many crime desks play an important role in the resource allocation process.

Resource allocation
Crime desks assist in the allocation of resources at two important stages. The first is on receiving the initial crime complaint. Here, crime desk personnel must decide on the basis of the complainant’s summary of events whether to refer the incident to the control room for allocation to a patrol officer or to conduct a telephone investigation themselves.

The decision whether the crime desk should conduct the initial investigation and complete the crime report is based on three sets of criteria. These are the force policy guidelines on responses to types of offence; the presence of discernible solvability or urgency factors at the scene or the need to prevent further recurrences; and the willingness of the victim or complainant to deal with the matter without a police visit.
The first is quite straightforward, well documented and more or less common to all forces with crime desks. All stipulate that crime desks should only conduct initial investigations into “minor” crime. This include offences such as theft of a pedal cycle, criminal damage of less than £25, theft from a meter, making off without payment, minor burglary (non-dwelling) and other types of minor theft. Some force policies also state that auto crime offences are suitable for a crime desk response, unless there are exceptional or aggravating circumstances that warrant attendance by an officer.

Solvability factors and the probability of negative consequences occurring as a result of non-attendance are also straightforward and tend to be well documented. The following “main points” provide a good example of the issues likely to be considered:

- Is the incident in progress or is a recurrence imminently likely?
- Is the road blocked or obstructed?
- Is there any danger to life or risk of injury?
- Are there suspects ... are they at or near the scene?
- Does the scene need protecting?
- Is there evidence to collect?
- Does property need securing?
- Are there witnesses to interview?
- Is forensic examination necessary?
- Is the caller distressed or in need of support?
- Does the caller agree that police attendance is unnecessary?

In terms of crime management (as opposed to public safety and other considerations) the main purpose of an officer attending in such circumstances is to verify and secure evidence and take a signed statement from any available witnesses. The willingness of the victim or complainant to accept a telephone investigation is, therefore, an equally important factor influencing whether the crime desk should provide the initial response. While believing that crime desks can provide better quality victim support than busy patrol officers, all forces agree that officers should attend the scene if the victim insists.

In addition to participating in the decision whether to deploy uniformed officers to crime scenes as part of the initial police response, crime desks play a key role in the allocation of detective officers to conduct further enquiries into selected incidents. As the central information point for all data related to incidents of crime, the crime desk is very well placed to make such decisions. In addition to removing the need for patrol officers to attend crime scenes, crime desks further alleviate administrative pressure by receiving and collating all relevant information. An extension of this function is assuring the quality of written crime reports completed by patrol officers.
To decide whether to allocate a case for further investigation by a detective, crime desk “allocators” or “evaluators” must verify that they are basing their decision on thorough initial enquiries. Many crime desk personnel commented that they frequently had to return crime reports to the first officers at the scene because they had failed to carry out basic investigative tasks. The most common omission was that of house-to-house enquiries, especially when officers had attended at unsociable hours. The crime desk’s role here is the management of initial enquiries and the resources that conduct them in pursuance of quality.

The crime desk role in allocating cases for further investigation is sometimes referred to as “secondary screening”. If previous efforts have generated no positive lines of enquiry, the incident can be retained by the crime desk for further analysis and comparison with past as well as more recent incidents (this will be dealt with in more detail in the next section). Or, if some leads have proved fruitful the case can be allocated to a CID detective or a beat officer for further investigation. Although allocating cases to beat officers is comparatively rare, crime desks may do this when it is felt that their local knowledge or recognition within the local community means that they are best placed to resolve the case.

If the case is allocated to a member of the CID the crime desk may continue to play a managerial role. Some forces have developed crime desks which take a very active and direct role in supervision. In these, crime desk personnel often include experienced detectives who may prescribe methods and tactics which the investigating officer must implement. This provides junior officers with closer supervision than is normally available and makes better use of their more experienced colleagues’ investigative expertise.

The crime desks’ analytical role may continue after a case is allocated to a detective officer. This amounts to another form of secondary investigation which can be almost entirely conducted from within the police station.

Intelligence, crime pattern analysis and secondary investigations

The crime desk conducts secondary investigations by analysing reports and integrating the information they generate with that from other sources. This can be used to direct operational officers’ activities and can produce tangible results, such as arrests and the recovery of stolen property.

Crime pattern analysts (CPAs) are often police civilians deployed to the crime desk alongside regular police officers. The ideal is for officers to use their investigative skills to direct the analyst’s attention towards certain incident types and the analyst responds by initiating his or her own field searches to provide them with information.

The analysis of completed crime reports can reveal discernible crime patterns. These may be extracted from victims’ or witnesses’ partial descriptions of offenders or their vehicles, analysis of the types of property targeted and temporal factors, such as the day of the week and the hour of the day. If a pattern is discovered the crime desk can re-allocate cases to “mobile”
officers to make further enquiries by pursuing likely suspects or investigating the possible locations of stolen property. As an Audit Commission study (Audit Commission, 1993) of a crime desk in one regional force recommended, this extends the “reporting” function:

... to provide a full investigative service to complaints taken over the phone. This involves a dedicated information and crime pattern analysis function that aims to carry on the investigative function beyond the point when a report has first been filed (Audit Commission, 1993, p. 64).

However, formal recognition and implementation of these tactics is the exception rather than the rule. Most provide a breakdown of type of crime by incidence and area but again, this is accounting and does little to direct investigative response. Ideally, crime pattern analysis should not only identify crime patterns but also explain them in order to predict future occurrences. This requires the application of adapted detective training and the use of deductive skill.

Crime desks’ secondary investigation role is complex and difficult to quantify. This is because the fruit of its labours usually takes the form of information communicated to operational officers who are then accredited with the results they achieve. However, the authors’ research found that effectiveness is discernible by the officers involved and appeared to depend on a range of factors, the most fundamental of which was the crime desk’s organisational structure.

In Helping with Enquiries: Tackling Crime Effectively, the Audit Commission noted that some forces had expanded the crime desk concept into “crime management units” (CMUs). These are more complex and intensively staffed departments which incorporate a number of hitherto separate functions. A simple crime desk may be staffed by one or two uniformed or detective officers with the primary role of receiving crime complaints and completing crime reports.

Such officers may, as one crime desk officer put it, “play at crime pattern analysis” but their contribution to intelligence gathering is likely to be informal and often perfunctory. It may simply take the form of relaying incidental observations onto the local intelligence officer (LIO).

The dividing line between a crime desk and a CMU is difficult to define, not least because some forces have called their CMUs “crime desks”. The difference is probably best defined in terms of scope and quality, as the CMU concept extends the crime desk into a more formally proactive function. The following example illustrates the advantages of amalgamating the crime desk with the LIO.

A local beat officer observed an individual whom he knew to have a series of convictions for burglary. The officer noted the observation and later entered it onto the computerised force intelligence system, together with a description of the person’s clothes which included a baseball cap bearing a distinctive brand label. Later that day a burglary was reported and officers were dispatched to the scene. The only remaining evidence was a baseball cap which the offender
had dropped unnoticed whilst fleeing. The description of the cap was noted in the crime report which was duly submitted to the crime desk. While cross-referencing crime reports with information from the LIO who had received the earlier message from the intelligence system, the crime desk officer established a link which provided the name of the known offender sighted earlier that day. This created a positive line of enquiry for the burglary and the case was allocated to a CID detective who subsequently made an arrest.

A key factor in the success of the above case was the close link between the LIO and the crime desk officer. A further factor that facilitated information sharing was the use of information technology as an efficient means of communication.

This provides CMUs with a more flexible structure. Police forces that suffer lower levels of crime have been able to develop more sophisticated integrated crime recording/intelligence systems. Although there are technical problems associated with handling vast quantities of information, these may indicate the route to improved information technology strategies in larger forces with higher levels of crime.

Previous research on crime desks’ contributions to investigating crime in one force indicated a favourable response:

... consultation with Area Operational Detectives reveals that they overwhelmingly felt that they couldn’t live without it [the crime desk] (Thames Valley Police, 1993, 1.18, p. 7).

However, further comments suggest that the benefits gained from the crime desk were as much to do with the administration of workloads as they were related to crime management.

... difficult crimes could be kept for a number of weeks then written up as though investigated – in fact little or nothing had been done. Officers now feel safe to say “there is nothing I can do with this” when presented with an unsolvable crime rather than exaggerate what has been done.

When researchers for this project asked officers about their feelings regarding crime desk investigations, most felt the question was not applicable. The one officer who did offer a comment listed advantages related to the preservation of other resources. However, these were considerably outweighed by his assessment of the disadvantages:

There is little effort put into evidence gathering, a reduction in detections, reduced contact with the public and a possible deterioration in their perception of the police.

In line with this comment, the public’s perspective is recognised to be crucial to the success or failure of consensual policing. In adopting a policy of non-attendance therefore, the perception of the public, and in particular the victim, assumes crucial importance:

It is the responsibility of every officer to ensure that the victim is a priority when investigating reports of crime. We must do all we can to help relieve the trauma for victims of crime (Gloucestershire Constabulary, 1993, p. 6).
Victims of crime

Various forces have conducted surveys of crime victims to gauge their view of the quality of service provided by the crime desk. South Yorkshire evaluated a long running pilot desk and found customer satisfaction levels of 84 per cent, compared to 70 per cent where crime victims were visited by a police officer (Audit Commission, 1993, p. 47).

A survey carried out among callers to the public assistance desk (PAD) in Greater Manchester corroborated this view. Only 7 per cent of people considered that the service provided by the PAD was very poor (Public Perception Survey; the Public Assistance Desk ‘P’ Division, Greater Manchester Police, 1992, p. 25).

Although another study (Carter and Mitchell, 1991) found those reporting crime to be generally happy with the policy of non-attendance, this was not the case with the majority of victims interviewed during this research. Out of a sample of 67 crime victims, 18 had their crime dealt with by telephone. Six of these said they did not receive a satisfactory explanation why officers would not attend, and a further six said it was attributed to the low value of the stolen property. These victims were generally dissatisfied, although not because they expected the police to detect the crime, as the following typical comment indicates:

I asked the police when they would be coming out to see me and they told me that it wouldn’t be necessary as they could take the details over the phone. When I asked them why they come out for other crimes and not mine, they said it was because [the stolen item] wasn’t worth much. I know it wasn’t worth much but that isn’t the point. My car was broken into, the police could at least come out and talk to me about it.

The remaining third were generally satisfied with the response. The one factor they all had in common was that the police had fully explained to them how they could better investigate their case by comparing it with other similar incidents and that allocating an officer would not assist this process. However, some crime desk officers were worried about public acceptance of non-attendance. One commented:

The majority of people are now realistic about crime and their expectations are lower, although they still need us to show concern.

Uncertainty breeds myths. Given that crime desks frequently lack a set of objectives and are sometimes perceived by officers in a negative way, the benefit of any research that demonstrates their worth is obvious. It is essential that “screened out” crime continues to be thoroughly investigated by crime desks and associated resources, particularly those related to crime pattern analysis.

Such incidents are all too often filed and forgotten. Although the term “screened out” is unpopular in many instances it is accurate. Initiatives to continue the investigative process beyond screening must be an essential part of any crime desk function.
Police crime recording systems attribute results to officers who achieve detections and this constitutes the principal means of measuring their performance. However, this precludes quantitative evaluation of crime desks’ investigative success, not least because crime desk officers rarely conduct enquiries away from the police station and arrests cannot be made by telephone. Researchers attempted to identify instances where crime desks had contributed to detections by analysing computerised crime records, but this proved fruitless as they did not include any reference to crime desk involvement.

It was therefore decided that the best means of evaluating crime desks’ contribution was to review their staffing and policies, and to seek the views of officers who either worked on the crime desk or used it as an information resource. Researchers also spoke to victims of crime who had reported the offence via the crime desk.

It became evident that even in its simplest form, the crime desk needed to be staffed by highly competent personnel in order to maximise its effectiveness. While staffing levels throughout the country, and even within forces, vary depending on the scope of the crime desk’s operations, the role of “crime manager” is usually assigned to either a uniformed or detective sergeant or occasionally a detective inspector. In smaller crime desks, he or she is normally assisted by one or two constables and perhaps a civilian data inputter who may also conduct some form of crime pattern analysis. This arrangement was found to be by far the most common throughout England and Wales and, whilst suitable for the handling of administrative tasks, it is severely limited with regard to secondary investigations.

Researchers found that it was common practice for officers on “light duties”[2] to be assigned to the crime desk. Some operational officers expressed the opinion that officers considered to be “a liability on the street” were also deployed in this way. This was certainly not always the case as many crime desk officers had demonstrated their competence elsewhere and welcomed the appointment. However, there was a strong undercurrent of opinion within police culture that felt that crime desk work was not “real police work”. Clearly, using crime desks as a convenient repository for the injured or incompetent does little to promote respect for it as an effective resource.

By contrast, CMUs were usually taken far more seriously. Officers were trained in specific techniques and were better resourced with equipment, particularly information technology tools. Many of them were CID officers and their supervisors had extensive field experience which they were progressively adapting to “static” investigations using crime desk methods.

Staffing is a vital ingredient in the crime desk’s effectiveness and a primary indicator of the roles it is supposed to fulfil. Where crime desk personnel were respected, operational officers seemed to make a point of visiting it to pass on information or to seek assistance. They regarded it as a pool of expertise which could make them more effective at responding to crime. Conversely, poorly
staffed crime desks tended to be located at the end of obscure corridors in the police station and were perceived to be virtual nursing homes and help lines for members of the public who wanted someone to talk to.

The evidence suggests that the crime desk must at the very least be recognised as a substitute for the first officer at the scene. This means that staff must have investigative skills and the ability to adapt them to the medium of non-attendance. If this is not addressed, the contention that crime desks are merely administration and statistics departments can be given credence.

Conclusion

Crime desks have now been operating in some forces for up to six years, and while little evaluative research has been done, there is a general consensus amongst forces that they have benefited crime management by responding to reports of minor crime and assisting resource allocation decisions (Gill et al., 1995). This has helped relieve pressure on control room staff, patrol officers and detectives by allowing them to concentrate on the tasks they are trained to do. They have also helped provide a better service to victims in the form of a more convenient and accessible resource. However, their direct contribution to investigations and proactive operations is less clear. This appeared to be a consequence of inadequately defined objectives regarding these roles. Moreover, considerable variations were found in officers’ interpretation of methods such as crime pattern analysis. This was compounded by a lack of documentation to enable an accurate evaluation of the potential effectiveness of such resources.

Given the Audit Commission’s identification of crime desks as central in the new approach to crime management, and given their widespread adoption by forces, researchers expected to find clearly stated objectives and precise operating procedures designed to guide them. However, with a few exceptions crime desks operated without any written guidelines and it was rare for staff to be provided with job descriptions. In fact almost everything apart from a list of the types of offence which could be screened out was left to the discretion of the officer in charge.

Permutations of the crime desk concept differed not only between forces, but even between areas in the same force as a result of local management objectives. However, while adapting to local needs is very important, crime desks have a force-wide role to play as well. In some areas, crime desks have become essential elements within a fully integrated crime management structure. Other crime desks are less well incorporated and tend to have an administrative, but not investigative role. One force had abandoned the local idea and provided two crime desks, each serving a number of policing areas.

Many operational officers acknowledged the potential of the crime desk in theoretical terms, yet retained the perhaps sub-cultural view that it was not “real police work”. Views also differed among those actually working on crime
In the main, those that had little or no investigative role found the job less desirable and satisfying. Job satisfaction was also lower on those crime desks where officers on “light duties” were temporarily employed.

However, although the Audit Commission advocated proactive policing as the best strategy for improving police effectiveness in the future (Audit Commission 1993, p. 54), a number of forces have started to doubt this approach (Police Review, 17 November, 1995, p. 11). Yet this may be a consequence of under-development of management structures. If the new integrated approach to crime management is to work then crime screening must not equate to “filing and forgetting” undetected cases. In order to begin to rescue this situation it is important that a number of issues be addressed to develop the crime desk’s investigative role.

First, the “reporting” stage in the investigative process must be acknowledged for what it is, i.e. part of the investigation. Some forces (e.g. Dyfed Powys Police) are currently attempting to evolve cost-effective ways of equipping uniformed response officers with more investigative skills in the belief that most can be learned from the crime scene by prompt arrival. If crimes allocated for initial investigation to the crime desk are not to be de-emphasised it is vital that similar priorities are applied to crime desk personnel.

Second, the crime desk’s role as an information sharing resource is under-exploited. Managers must develop more efficient and user-friendly methods of communicating the data they already have and attracting operational officers to contribute further information.

Third, crime desks have the potential to make significant contributions to further or secondary investigations by analysing reports and contributing to the intelligence system. However, in order to achieve this greater attention needs to be directed at developing crime pattern analysis and other practical research methods. This will inform proactive initiatives by directing operational officers to high risk venues and identifying likely suspects.

Finally, record keeping methods must change in recognition of the crime desk’s investigative role, and in order that its contribution and performance can be more accurately measured.

Notes
1. Between 1982 and 1992 the Home Office indicated that “recorded crime has risen by 74 per cent while the proportion of crimes cleared up has fallen from 37 per cent to 26 per cent” (Audit Commission, 1993, p. 1). This against a backdrop of increased police spending in real terms of 43 per cent (Audit Commission, 1993, p. 7).
2. Light duties refers to tasks assigned to those recovering from injury or other incapacitation.

References


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**Further reading**


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