Providing victims of crime with information on police response activity: The challenges faced by the police non-emergency call-handler

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Abstract

Police policy in England and Wales is to always explain to a member of the public who contacts the police what will happen as a result of them doing so. During initial contact between a victim of crime and the police, this task often falls to police call-handlers. This article examines information on police response activity provided to victims by police non-emergency call-handlers during such instances of contact. Empirical analysis highlights the importance that call-handlers place on providing accurate information on response activity to those who call the police, and the various challenges that they can encounter when attempting this.

Keywords

Introduction

The contact that a person has with the public police often plays a part in shaping their judgement of this institution (Bradford et al., 2009a; Skogan, 2006). There is a substantial and rapidly growing body of literature on the relationship between public/ police contact and public trust in the police and judgements of police legitimacy (Bradford, 2011, 2014; Bradford and Myhill, 2015; Bradford et al., 2009b, 2014; Hough et al., 2010, 2013; Jackson and Bradford, 2010; Jackson et al., 2011, 2012; Myhill and Bradford, 2012; Sargeant et al., 2016; Sunshine and Tyler, 2003a, 2003b; Tyler, 2006, 2011; Tyler and Huo, 2002). There is evidence in many of these studies to suggest that when members of the public experience contact with the police that they judge to be unsatisfactory their opinion of the police is often less favourable as a consequence. Moreover, the public have been found to be primarily concerned with the way in which they are treated during their contact with the police, often viewing respectful, legitimate and fair treatment as more important than obtaining a favourable outcome (Elliott et al., 2011; Engel, 2005; Mastrofski et al., 1996, 2002; McClusky, 2003; McClusky et al., 1999; Murphy and Barkworth, 2014; Skogan, 2006; Tyler, 1990, 2001). It is therefore important that the police behave fairly, are respectful and instill trust and confidence in their behaviour through the contact that they have with the public, as when the public trust the police and judge this institution positively they are more likely to cooperate, report matters and provide information, without which the police would struggle to operate effectively (Jackson et al., 2013;

Koskela et al., 2016; Mawby, 2007; Murphy, 2015; Murphy and Cherney, 2012; Murphy et al., 2008, 2009; Tankebe, 2013; Tyler and Fagan, 2008).

Contact between the public and the police is unceasing. Roughly half of the British population initiate contact with the police at least once in any year (Waddington, 1993), and the police are generally the first representatives of the state that a victim of crime will come into contact with (Joutsen, 1987). This contact can occur for a variety of reasons; for example, public-initiated contact can take place when a person wishes to report a crime, ask for advice or information or report lost property, and police-initiated contact can occur when an officer makes enquiries as part of an investigation, makes an arrest, performs a stop and search or provides information on activity or policy in a public setting. The recent police and government drive to encourage the public to bring the issues that concern them locally to the attention of the police, to cooperate further with the police and to generally get more involved with policing (Home Office, 2010, 2012, 2016) has played a part in the diversification of platforms for contact, and social media, text messages, electronic crime reporting and community meetings are now all standard fora for police/public interaction.

In addition to the general efforts made by the police in recent years to increase quality of service (Reiner, 2010), the police have also made concerted efforts to improve the ease of contact for the public and 'make every contact count' (NPIA, 2012: 4). This included making improvements to their non-emergency call-handling functions and introducing a single non-emergency telephone number for England and Wales: 101. In England and Wales, 80 million calls a year are made by the public to the police for assistance (HMIC, 2007). For many victims and witnesses of crime, the first contact that they have with the police takes place when they phone and speak to a police call-handler (Leeney and Mueller-Johnson, 2012). As Povey (2001: 154) notes, 'first impressions count .. . [and so i]t is vital that 21st century technology is employed to provide the public with swift and easy access to police services'.

The provision of information on crime and police activity has been shown to improve public opinion of the police (Barrett and Fletcher, 2013; Chapman et al., 2002; Hohl et al., 2010; Quinton, 2011). Studies have highlighted the importance that victims of crime place on the information that they receive from the police and on the quality and frequency of the updates they receive as a police investigation progresses (Coupe and Griffiths, 1999; Elliott et al., 2012; Robinson and Stroshine, 2005). When a person contacts the police to report a crime – the most common reason for contacting the police (Allen et al., 2006) – or to make the police aware of an issue, police call-handlers will usually provide this person with information on what is likely to happen as a result of their call. For example, an examination of over 26,000 phone calls made to the police found that a typical call-operator statement during a call was to promise the dispatch of a patrol car (Scott, 1981). Call-handlers might also explain that the police will investigate a matter and how this will happen, or that the information will be recorded in case it is required in the future. The way in which these post-call activities are described is an important part of victim's contact experience with the police, is likely to play a part in shaping their judgement of the encounter, and could potentially influence their opinion of the police more broadly. Practices will vary between those who handle 999 emergency calls and those who handle other – non-emergency – calls from the public; it is the latter that is considered here.

There are a number of police and criminal justice documents that set out on how the police in England and Wales will behave and operate in instances of contact with the public. These documents describe both general principles for contact over the telephone, in person and through other means, and also what victims of crime can expect from the police in various circumstances of contact and stages of an investigation. Although these documents have different purposes and cover these matters in different levels of detail, they provide a sense of what a victim of crime can expect from the police by way of information on what will happen as a result of reporting a crime.

The National Call Handling Standards (ACPO, 2005) described, as part of the 'Quality of Service Commitment' outlined in the document, that the police will:

'take your concerns seriously and explain what we are doing to address them, including whether or not we are taking action and why ... [and that w]henever you contact us we will explain how we are going to deal with your enquiry (2005: 23).'

Although the document does not state explicitly when the explanation will occur (i.e. within the initial phone call or at some other point), the language included here implies that early in the process the police will provide some information on how they will 'deal with' the enquiry, and that a victim of crime will have a sense of what is going to happen as a result of this.

Police call-handling policy is currently shaped at a national level by the National Contact Management Principles and Practice (NPIA, 2012), guidance that has superseded the National Call Handling Standards document. The 'first principle' in this document concerns 'the Customer' (i.e. the person who is engaged in contact with the police). One of the critical success factors of this first principle, according to the Contact Management guidelines, is 'keeping people informed', which is described as 'being able to demonstrate how service users will be kept informed on progress and outcomes relating to them' (2012: 12). The document states that 'one of the key influences on satisfaction and confidence is the provision of information to the public on the progress of their investigation' (2012: 23). Although the document makes clear that this covers ongoing progress and updates, it is less clear as to whether this incorporates the provision of information on next steps during the first instance of contact.

Other policy documentation is geared more towards victims and witnesses of crime. The Code of Practice for Victims of Crime (Ministry of Justice, 2015) sets out the services that must be provided to victims of crime in England and Wales. The document states that victims are entitled to a written acknowledgement that they have reported a crime, information on what they can expect from the criminal justice system and information on the police investigation as it develops, such as if a suspect is arrested and charged and any bail conditions imposed. Of course, it is unlikely that callers will receive all of this during their first contact with the police. Indeed, the flow diagram within the Code of Practice document (2015: 8) that maps a victim's 'journey through the criminal justice system' suggests that the only information that the initial police representative will provide is the crime reference number, and that information on the investigation (or reasons why an investigation will not take place) does not come until later. The Witness Charter (Ministry of Justice, 2013) contains less information on what can be expected during this initial contact with the police, but does state that if a person reports a crime or incident 'the police will ensure that they explain how they are going to deal with the matter' (2013: 8). Nevertheless, collectively the policy documentation is not explicit on what the role of the police call-handler is during the initial contact

a person makes with the police through this channel. Although the information that a victim of crime can expect to receive in the period of time following their call and during a police investigation is described in several places, exactly when the various parts of this will occur and how much of it will come from the police call-handler during the first contact is unclear.

This article examines the way in which 12 non-emergency[1] call-handlers at a single police Constabulary in England provided information on police response activity during 55 calls received from victims calling to report non-emergency crimes. This article presents exploratory qualitative analysis of data collected as part of a broader study (Stafford, 2013) that examined the contact experienced between the police and the public during and after non-emergency calls made to the police. In a previous article (Stafford, 2016), which analysed the content and dialogue of calls and accounts from members of the public concerning their experience of calling the police, this researcher illustrated how the participants of this study were concerned primarily with how they were treated during their call and were less concerned with some of the factors that the police used to measure performance, such as call answering times. Turning now to another area of enquiry from the 2013 study, this article considers how non-emergency call-handlers describe post-call police response activity to members of the public who call the police and identifies some of the challenges that call-handlers can face when attempting to do this.

Methodology and sample description

The aims of the research presented in this article were threefold. These were: to gather data that illustrates how police call-handlers indicate to victims of crime what will happen as a result of their call to the police; to identify the key aspects of and the divergences and similarities in the information provided by the call-handlers on this response activity; and to systematically identify the factors that call-handlers view as important or challenging when providing this information and consider their implications for policy and practice.

This research involved call-handlers at a single police constabulary in England. The constabulary is one of the larger constabularies in England (in terms of geographical coverage and number of employees), and within the constabulary's boundaries is one of the United Kingdom's major cities and a number of towns and rural areas. The constabulary organised its operations so that there were separate call-handling facilities for non-emergency 101 calls and emergency 999 calls. This article concerns the activities and experiences of civilian police call-handlers who were stationed at the constabulary's non-emergency telephone call centre, located at its headquarters.

A sample of call-handlers was recruited following an open invitation in the call centre's internal monthly news update email to take part in the study. This invitation contained information on the study, on the research process and on the interview topics, and would have been received by all call-handlers employed by the constabulary at that point in time (which was around 60). Twelve call-handlers (eight females and four males) responded to this email and formed the sample. Eleven of these call-handlers chose to provide information on their ethnicity and all described themselves as

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[1] The participating police constabulary categorised 'non-emergency' calls as those concerning matters that did not require an immediate response.

'white' or 'white British'. The call-handlers provided information on their length of service, which ranged from one year to 20 years, with an average service length of seven years. As described in the invitation email, by taking part in this research these call-handlers granted this researcher permission to listen to recordings of some of their calls from members of the public, and agreed to partake in a face-to-face semi-structured interview, which usually lasted around 30 minutes. Interviews with call-handlers included questions on: the content of the calls that they had answered; the process and techniques that they employed and their use of language; the likely police response to the call; and their experience of working in the police call centre.

A sample of 55 calls handled by these call-handlers was assembled. Having already gained informed consent from the sample of call-handlers, the same consent was sought from victims of crime who called the police to report a matter. At the end of every call that they dealt with during the fieldwork period, call-handlers would ask callers whether they would be willing to be contacted by letter and then a follow up telephone call by a university researcher examining the constabulary's call-handling service. If they agreed, callers would then receive a letter from this researcher explaining the study and providing a full account of what their participation would involve. This letter would be followed by a phone call, at which point their informed consent would be sought. Following their agreement to take part in the study, their call to the police would be transcribed, as would the police crime report for the incident.

The focus of this article is on the experiences of non-emergency call-handlers. The principal data considered here are interviews with a sample of 12 call-handlers, transcripts of 55 calls handled by these individuals and transcripts of the 55 police crime reports for these calls. However, to add further insight into the topics of interest, relevant extracts are taken from other sources of data gathered as part of this researcher's broader study on non-emergency call-handling (Stafford, 2013). The other sources used here are interviews with the 55 callers who made the calls in the sample, interviews with 22 police officers who responded to some of these calls, and interviews with call centre supervisors and senior managers in the participating constabulary's communications department. Although the topics considered in this article were not all covered explicitly through questions used in these interviews, the comments made that have relevance to these topics were extracted, coded and analysed with the principal data.

These data were analysed using a Thematic Analysis methodology (Braun and Clarke,2006). More specifically, this study employed a theoretical approach to Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 84), whereby the data was organised according to predetermined codes that were in line with the research questions designed for this study. This facilitated a search for patterns, trends, differences and similarities in semantic content.

The study's aims provided a coding framework for this analysis. Unique codes were used to systematically identify and extract data that concerned: (1) the description of the response activity provided by the call-handler during the phone call; accounts or information pertaining to the police response to each incident provided by the callers (2), the police-call-handlers (3), the responding police officers (4), or described in the police crime reports for these incidents (5); and (6) other views or information concerning the provision of information on police response activity. Themes emerged from the analysis of the coded data. These concerned: the similarities and differences between how call-handlers were trained to provide information on police activity and how they would do this

during calls; the degree of accuracy in the information and the extent to which it was delivered honestly and sensitively; how other evidence, events and factors can affect the accuracy of information on police response activity; and divergence in how separate departments and local police teams within the constabulary responded to certain crimes. In line with Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis model (2006), the data within these themes were organised in to a coherent analytic narrative which presents an argument against the aims of the study. Within this narrative, where a research participant is quoted or referenced, a single letter (to illustrate a participant group, i.e. call-handler or caller) followed by a unique number is included so that readers can distinguish between respondents.[2]

Non-emergency call-handlers and information on post-call activity

The participating police constabulary's non-emergency calls were handled by civilian call-handlers who operated in a call centre that received calls from across the constabulary's geographical area. When call-handlers answered calls that concerned something that they identified as a crime, they would work from a list of question prompts to gather information and then make an entry on the constabulary's computerised crime recording system. In addition to recording basic details such as name, address, timeframe and whether there were any known suspects, call-handlers were responsible for establishing the existence of specific 'lines of enquiry'[3] for an investigation. The lines of enquiry that should be covered as standard in each instance were: whether there were witnesses; whether there was closed-circuit television (CCTV) that could have captured anything of relevance to the incident; whether there was scope for crime scene investigation (CSI) officers to be able to gather forensic evidence at the scene; and whether items were left behind by the perpetrator. As noted by Tilley et al. (2007), this is the beginning of the investigation process, and it is the information recorded during this exchange, both its accuracy and the thoroughness with which the details surrounding the event are explored, that influences the likelihood of a police response occurring and what this response will consist of.

Having recorded the information from the caller, the call-handler would usually complete the exchange by providing information that outlined what would happen next. The constabulary's policy for responding to non-emergency incidents was that every caller would receive either a phone call or visit from an officer (to ask for more details or to update a caller on the progress of an investigation) or a letter from the constabulary (explaining that the matter could not be investigated in isolation due to lack of evidence, but that the information had been recorded as it may prove valuable in the future). This policy appeared to underpin the approach that call-handlers were trained to take when describing non-emergency response activity. A supervisor in the police call centre explained that call-handlers would use a version of the following statement to do this:

'The [information that the caller provided] will be passed down to the local station .. . it will be assessed to see if there's further lines of enquiry, and so contact [with the caller] will be made over the next few days, whether it's by letter or by phone or by a police officer, telling them what the next actions will be.'

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[2] The letters used in these reference codes are 'C' for callers and 'CH' for call-handlers.
[3] This term was used by the participating constabulary in reference to the potential leads or starting points that a responding officer might explore when investigating a matter.

Analysis of the calls in this sample showed that call-handlers rarely followed this format completely. The delivery and clarity of key details within this statement, such as where the caller's report would go, what would happen to it, whether there would be follow-up contact and when and how it would occur, would vary. Although the sample was too small to explore patterns and trends in this variation (i.e. how the response information might vary by crime type or as a result of the tendencies of individual call-handlers) with any real validity, examples of the variation that was recorded provide useful insights into the divergence that can occur across a number of calls made by victims of crime to the police.

Some call-handlers would explain how an incident would be allocated to an officer and the steps that the officer would take to deal with the matter. For example, caller 19 reported the theft of two items of jewellery and the call-handler (CH3) described the police response as follows:

'Obviously what will happen now is I've recorded the crime and I'll give you your crime number so you can give it to the insurance company. This will be sent through to the District Allocation Unit, and if they think that there's any line of enquiry that can be made somebody will be allocated, an officer will be allocated from your area to investigate this and that officer will be in touch with you within the next few days. They'll need to contact you to let you know what's going to happen. They might possibly have to take a statement from you.'

In other instances, call-handlers provided callers with vague, informal accounts of police post-call activity. Caller 83 had contacted the police to report an incident of harassment and the call-handler's (CH10) description of the police response activity was simply: 'Now, um, I think I've got enough to start the ball rolling with this ... I'm not sure how far it will go, but it's worth a try.' In some cases, the suggestion that contact would occur was the only information a caller was left with at the end of a call. For example, caller 141 had contacted the police to report ongoing incidents of deliberate vandalism to fences resulting in animals escaping and the call-handler (CH12) concluded the call by stating simply that 'somebody from the local nick will be in touch with you'. There were also four calls in the sample where call-handlers provided no information whatsoever on the post-call activity.

Accuracy with honesty and sensitivity

The way in which the police treat the public has been shown to have a strong association with public judgements of the police. The literature highlights the importance that the public have been found to place upon being treated fairly, politely and with dignity by the police, and how treatment of this nature can lead to the police being judged as legitimate, justified in their use of power and worthy of respect (Jackson et al., 2011, 2013; Sunshine and Tyler, 2003a). Those who call the police regarding non-emergency matters have been shown to find the way in which they were treated by the call-handler as the most memorable aspect of their call (Stafford, 2016).

The call-handlers in the sample were asked how they go about describing police response activity to victims of crime and whether they feel that there are things which are important to cover. Accuracy and honesty were seen as paramount by the call-handlers, as was delivering information sensitively.

'Well, you have to be as honest as anything, because you have to be realistic, but you also have to give them some element of hope, and I mean sometimes you just know in your own heart that it's going to be just 'filed',[4] but you don't want to tell them that ... I mean I try to explain to them as much as possible, as far as my ability, as far as I know, what will happen to this particular incident, and I like to be honest with them, and I say to them, 'from the information you've given me, I don't really think that there's any line of enquires, however, that's not a decision I will make, but it may well be filed at the moment and you will be notified what action will be taken'. I just think it's fair (CH3).'

Other call-handlers in the sample provided similar accounts.

'I don't want to give anybody false expectations, so I always say 'if there are further lines of enquiry, officers will be in touch' .. . and it's like, yeah, saying that '[Crime Scene Investigation] will definitely be round', and 'we'll get an officer round in ten minutes', is just not going to happen, so you know, it's just a case of being as honest as you can be without upsetting people really. I just say 'if there are further lines of enquiry they will be in touch', which, without saying it, if there aren't, they won't (CH13).'

'I've heard some of the operators say 'well nobody's going to come out for that', and [I think] oh ... don't say that, it might be right, but, word it differently, say 'we'll see what we can do', or 'we can't guarantee' (CH5).'

The manner in which call centre operators communicate with callers and the ways in which they demonstrate emotion can have an effect on how callers judge their experience of contact (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). A caring police response, according to Waddington (1993), is one where the police demonstrate characteristics such as consideration, an attribute portrayed as important in these call-handler accounts. However, Leeney and Mueller-Johnson's enquiry into police call-handling (2010) concluded that delivering good customer service in a call centre environment does not necessarily entail conducting a forensically sound call. Indeed, for call-handlers to explain the process of how a matter will be assessed, by whom, whether the victim will be contacted and how and when, but at the same time ensuring that this information is accurate, is not misleading and is delivered sensitively, involves providing a carefully balanced narrative. Although there were 15 calls in the sample where the information provided by the call-handler proved to be accurate, it was often brief and without content covering at least one of the procedural elements described here.

Some call-handlers took a particular approach to attempting to deliver an empathetic yet accurate narrative. Their approach was to explain that the police response would depend on the outcome of an assessment made by someone else at the constabulary and to give a sense of what some of the possible outcomes could be. This approach was employed in six of the calls in the sample. An example of this occurred in a call made by caller 31, who had contacted the police to report damage to her motor vehicle. At the end of this call the call-handler (CH3) explained that:

'This information will be sent to the District Allocation Unit at [place name]. If the officer there feels that there is any line of enquiries to be made they will obviously allocate it to an officer to carry out those enquiries .. . if not, you will receive a letter to say that there is no line of enquiries and that the matter has been filed.'

Although the information in this example includes police terminology and a somewhat unclear explanation of the incident allocation process, it does describe the two most common courses of action (i.e. that the matter will be either investigated or filed) and gives an indication as to the circumstances in which the caller could expect to hear from the police again. Taking this approach ensured that callers were aware of the possible outcomes of their call to the police.

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[4] This was the term used by the constabulary for instances when there was insufficient information to conduct an investigation, but where a record would be kept of the incident so that it could be referred to if needed in the future.

Other evidence, events and factors

The ease and accuracy with which call-handlers could explain police response activity was also affected by wider circumstances. It became apparent during the fieldwork that factors outside the information that call-handlers record from callers can play a part in determining police response activity. As one call-handler noted:

'I try not to tell [callers] too much because for all I know it's going to get filed and nothing will be done ... but there's always the possibility that a bit later on other information might come in that might produce a line of enquiry, and there's also the possibility that what you're sending through might be one in a series of crimes that have happened of a similar nature .. . so I try not to dishearten the victim because there's the possibility that there's stuff out there that I don't know that could be of use to the investigation, so I try not to assume (CH10).'

Although this call-handler demonstrated some awareness of these factors, interviews with other participants suggested that this might not have been a universal perspective. Police officers interviewed as part of the broader study explained that call-handlers will sometimes make an assessment of the information provided by a caller and explain to callers definitively whether there will be a police response. For instance, call-handlers may inform callers who can provide no lines of enquiries that as a result it is unlikely that a police investigation will take place. However, evidence can come to light after such exchanges that will increase the chances of a police investigation occurring. Alternatively, where callers provide information on evidence and potential lines of enquiry that prompt a call-handler to explain that these will be explored by a police officer there remains a possibility that these will prove unusable or unfruitful or that no officers will be available to respond.

A number of officers blamed call-handler lack of knowledge concerning response process and associated issues as the cause of the inaccurate information that is provided to callers. One responding officer explained that he frequently came into contact with callers who had been misinformed by call-handlers on aspects of police response activity. The officer stated that: 'I'll explain to [callers] "well, actually [a non-emergency call-handler is] not a police officer. They don't know how to deal with this crime and they may have given you incorrect information."' Further indication of the problems caused by inaccurate information was provided by one of the senior officers in the participating constabulary's communications department:

'I think 12–15% [of the calls received by the non-emergency call centre] a day are saying 'where are you? I've called you, you said you were coming, you haven't arrived'. Now some of that will be because something else has happened and we haven't been able to get there, but some of that will be because when somebody took the initial call, without being sighted on the full picture, they've said 'oh yeah, this is something we come round and see you about', when it may not be.'

This is highly problematic for the police. According to Hochschild (1983), negative judgements of an organisation are likely to be made when it provides a service that is not in line with that which it has previously stated it would provide. If police call-handlers are informing callers that they will be contacted within a certain timeframe or that the police will take a particular course of action in response to a call and this does not then occur, this can cause call volumes to increase and may also have a negative impact upon public judgements of the police.

At the point of data collection,[5] there were 10 calls within the sample where police follow-up contact was promised by a call-handler which then did not occur (four calls), or where information on when or how this contact would occur was found to be inaccurate (six calls). In line with Hochschild (1983), this was often reported to have been a factor within a caller's negative judgement of the police. For example, caller 59 had contacted the police to report the receipt of a malicious text message. This was linked to an ongoing court case that the caller was involved in. The call-handler (CH7) provided the following information regarding the post-call activity.

'What we'll do, [caller's name], is we'll go through the crime form together. Once I've done that, a couple of things are going to happen. First of all I'm going to give you a crime number ... because you're going to need that, and what I will do then is send a copy off to the local District Allocation Unit so that they can look at it, cross reference it to that crime that we've just mentioned, and they can then do their magic on that, alright?'

Following this, the caller then asked whether she would be contacted that same day, to which the call-handler responded that he 'would imagine so'. Despite the clarity of the 'District Allocation Unit' doing their 'magic' on something being questionable, the caller noted during interview that she had gone away from this exchange with a specific idea of the response timeframe. However, the caller described the police response as not being very helpful as she was not contacted within the timescale that the call-handler had suggested.

Variation in response activity

Call-handlers explained that there was variation in how separate departments and local police teams within the constabulary responded to certain crimes.

'We're split into different districts. Different districts deal with different things in different ways, and obviously budgets are spent differently and priorities are on different things. So that's the only thing, you know, if you live in that house and you're on that district, if you lived a hundred metres down the road and crossed over to that one, you might get a different response' (CH6).

'You can't give sort of like, 'oh yeah we'll be there at 10 o'clock', because it depends on what the local beat teams are going to do that day and how many staff they've got on' (CH5).

Call-handlers appeared to be unable to keep informed of all such information, meaning that their knowledge of how the police would respond to certain kinds of crime in particular locations within the constabulary area was incomplete. This caused challenges for call-handlers when attempting to provide information on police response activity and meant that the activity that they described could be different to the activity that transpired. For example, caller 97 contacted the police to report a theft from his car. The caller explained during the call that his vehicle, having been broken into, had been left in a state where it could no longer be locked and as a result he planned to move it to a secure location. A call-handler (CH2) then provided the following information:

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[5] In this study, interviews with callers and analysis of police crime reports concerning an incident were usually conducted between one and three weeks after a call to the police was made. At this point in time, response activity could be complete or ongoing. As a result of this, although the instances where contact information had been provided which then proved to be inaccurate could be identified at the point of enquiry, further response activity could transpire after this point making the response activity accurate (or indeed inaccurate).

Call-handler 2:   If you could just resist doing that for an hour or two, because obviously CSI may want to come down and take finger prints of the stereo unit and the glove box, OK? If you could just try and resist doing that for a little while?

Caller 97:   Yeah OK.

Call-handler 2:   I'll pass this on to my colleague and we'll get them to give you a call back on your mobile.

Caller 97:   Ok ... so they're going to phone me are they?

Call-handler 2:   Yeah, what they'll do is they'll probably pass this on to scenes of crime so they can obviously contact you to take finger prints, it would be really helpful if we could get that done today.

The call-handler suggested reasonably clearly that the caller would be contacted within 'an hour or two' and that further activity would be likely to take place that same day. The caller, following these instructions, proceeded to wait with the vehicle for three hours expecting the police to arrive or to be contacted by the police by phone, neither of which happened. The caller then called the police a second time and was informed (in the caller's words) that 'no one would be coming because they didn't think they'd be able to do it', and that 'they don't come out to our area for car break-ins because they never find anything'. Not only was the caller given a timescale for a response that proved to be inaccurate, but the response description appeared to differ between the two calls. The caller described this as 'inconvenient', stating that 'it would have been helpful if they'd given me the right information to start with'.

In another instance a call-handler (CH13) explained some of these factors to a caller (C96), ensuring that they were aware of how workload in their local area could play a part in determining the police response activity. Following the caller's report of a theft from a motor vehicle the call-handler went on to describe what the response activity might consist of.

Call-handler 13:   I'll let our CSI teams know. Normally they don't tend to come out to theft from motor vehicles, but when offenders lever the doors out they manage to sometimes leave fingerprints out on the rubber seals that you as the vehicle owner would never touch that area of the car, so it's possible that there could be something there. So I'll let them know and if they want to attend they'll give you a call to arrange that with yourself.

Caller 96:   Would that be this afternoon?

Call-handler 13:   Possibly, it does depend on what else is happening in that particular district ... but they probably will ring you just to scope out whether there's likely to be anything that they can look at on the vehicle, if they've got any interest in it .. . So if you don't hear from them, it would suggest that they're not coming, mainly because of other things that are happening on district at the moment.

This call-handler demonstrated knowledge of how crime scene investigators respond to certain incidents and an awareness of how the police response would depend on a number of factors. As it turned out, the caller was contacted again and asked to bring their vehicle to a police station for a forensic examination.

Discussion and conclusion

This article has presented an exploratory examination of the non-emergency call-handler's role in providing information on police response activity during a victim of crime's initial contact with the

police, and of the challenges that call-handlers can encounter when attempting to ensure the accuracy of this information. The literature discussed in this article highlights how contact with the police and the way in which the police provide information can affect public opinion of this institution, particularly during the initial experience of contact between a victim of crime and the police. The nonemergency call-handler, as the first and sometimes only representative of the police that a victim of crime will come into contact with, has a critical part to play in ensuring that they portray this institution to be fair, trustworthy and legitimate by asking for information sensitively and by explaining with accuracy and clarity what will happen following the victim's call. As noted previously, the public are less likely to bring the issues that concern them to the attention of the police if they have negative opinions of the police, or judge the police to behave unfairly or illegitimately. Providing the public with accurate information is an important aspect of any contact process and will play a part in inspiring positive judgements.

This article has explored how a police constabulary in England undertakes this aspect of their business. The three aims of this study were: to gather data that illustrates how police call-handlers indicate to victims of crime what will happen as a result of their call to the police; to identify the key aspects of and the divergences and similarities in the information provided by the call-handlers on this response activity; and to systematically identify the factors that call-handlers view as important or challenging when providing this information and consider their implications for policy and practice. Call-handlers were trained to provide information on the immediate next steps that would occur following a victim's report of a non-emergency crime. This involved describing where the information would go, who would look at it, whether there would be follow-up contact and when and how it would occur. However, it was rare for a response activity description to contain information on all of these points. The call-handlers in the sample wanted to provide accurate and honest information and deliver this in a sensitive manner, but when certain factors were present (such as local police variation in priorities and resources) there was a risk that parts of the call-handler's response description could be inaccurate. This was reported to be problematic as it could lead to callers being misinformed, needing to call the police again (increasing call volumes unnecessarily) and potentially judging the police negatively. As argued in the procedural justice literature, when such judgements occur, members of the public are less likely to cooperate with the police and to judge the police as legitimate (Bradford, 2011; Bradford et al. 2009; Jackson et al. 2013; Tyler and Fagan 2008).

This article puts forward the following arguments. First, call-handlers have an important part to play in the provision of information on the immediate processes that constabularies employ when victims report non-emergency crime. The participating police constabulary recognised this and trained its call-handlers to explain these immediate actions during the initial phone call, but police and criminal justice system documentation is not explicit concerning what information a victim of crime can expect from the police during their first contact with this institution. The indication in the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime (Ministry of Justice, 2015) document that a crime reference number will always be provided appears to be the only public information specifically on what will be covered during the first exchange. Those producing this and other documentation should consider whether it would be improved by the inclusion of clear statements that explain how and when the police will provide information on response activity and which elements of this are the responsibility of the initial call-handler who answers non-emergency calls from victims. Second, call-handlers can encounter specific challenges when trying to provide information on police response activity.

Combating these challenges requires changes in police policy and process. There is a need for police call-handler training documentation and activities to highlight such challenges, give examples of the problems that they can cause and provide guidance on how call-handlers can avoid or combat them.

Non-emergency call-handlers, through both their contribution to the police's provision of information to the public and as a main point of contact for the public, are a vital part of 21st-century policing. Their role is, of course, far broader than just delivering response activity descriptions. The police in England and Wales have been under considerable budgetary pressures in recent years (HMIC, 2014), experienced on top of the changes made to the way in which they are governed and scrutinised. Predictions were made that reducing police numbers and therefore visibility and activity because of this austerity would be likely to erode public confidence in the police (Sindall and Sturgis, 2013). As society, crime and policing change and become increasingly complicated by the conditions of the 21st century, policing through 'informed proactivity' has been identified as the approach 'best suited to delivering results' (Higgens and Hales, 2016) in this environment. The contributions of support staff, and of non-emergency call-handlers in particular, are central to this. The information recorded by the police call-handler with whom a victim has initial contact is an important part of the investigation process, and missing information at this stage can delay or even prevent police response activity. In an era of austerity the police are increasingly likely to prioritise investigative activity in instances where it makes 'financial sense' to do so, progressing the most serious of cases and those where there is 'clear evidence pointing towards a suspect' (Brogden and Ellison, 2013: 48–49). This means that cases may be left unexplored if initial investigative steps are handled poorly and lines of enquiry missed as a result. By inspiring confidence, trust and judgements of legitimacy concerning the police through their representation of this institution and their collection and provision of information, non-emergency call-handlers play a fundamental part in the delivery of core police business and their contribution should not be undervalued.

It is important at this point to highlight the limitations of this study so that this article's conclusions can be considered in their wake. The sample of research participants was small and is not representative of the population of call-handlers at the participating constabulary, let alone the police constabularies in England and Wales. The views and experiences of other call-handlers may differ from those of the research sample and the conclusions presented here may well prove inaccurate or without nuance when applied to different or larger populations. The sample is also too small to explore the relationship between factors such as crime type, time of day, day of the week, and habits and tendencies of individual call-handlers and the information that call-handlers give out. Interrogation of a large dataset that captures these variables may well reveal interesting correlations between some of these factors. In addition to issues arising from sample size, it is also important to acknowledge that this study concerned only one police constabulary in England and only focused on non-emergency calls and call-handling. It is possible that an examination of the practices employed at other constabularies, and of the information provision practices employed by those who handle emergency calls and other forms of crime reporting, could lead to different conclusions. Finally, the timing of the analysis (between one and three weeks after a call was made to the police) meant that further police response activity could still take place after a caller was interviewed and a police crime report scrutinised. Response activity that was found to be inaccurate at the point of enquiry could have gone on to become accurate (and vice versa). To systematically determine the proportion of

instances where police response activity is described accurately, analysis would need to be conducted at a point in time when all response activity is completed.

Due to these empirical limitations, this study should be treated with caution. This exploratory article points to some important preliminary findings, but additional activity, which this researcher hopes to conduct in the near future, is required to test their accuracy and broader application and explore these issues in more detail. Further examination of the information on police response activity provided by police call-handlers during initial contact with victims of crime would provide nuanced insight into the way in which the police undertake this task and into the challenges that they can encounter when doing so and would determine how this specific act can influence public opinion of the police. Understanding why the variation that this article has identified occurs (and what the implications of this variation are) will also be an important part of future inquiries.

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