

# We must acknowledge the limits of policing and punishment in the absence of social justice

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**Robert Reiner** argues that it is time we re-evaluated our 'common sense' conceptions of the role of the police, and started to take seriously the notion that socio-economically rooted pressures generating criminality have been suppressed, but not tackled, by the decades of getting tough on crime but not its causes.



A quick Google search reveals that 'common sense policing' has become a busy buzz-word. There are scores of recent references to speeches by police leaders, politicians of all parties and newspaper editorials, extolling its virtues as *the way* to 'cut crime'.

The problem with this assumption was best put by Raymond Chandler in the quote that heads [my new booklet](#) (£): "*Crime isn't a disease, it's a symptom. Cops are like a doctor that gives you aspirin for a brain tumour.*"

This comparison with a pill is not intended as an attack on the police: aspirin is a wonderful drug, regularly taken by me when I have to meet deadlines for completing lectures, articles, books or blogs. It suppresses the nasty symptoms of headache that prevent me achieving my goals. But it doesn't do the writing job for me. If I don't use the opportunity of the clear head aspirin gives, and go surfing the net instead of processing relevant words, the underlying problem will return – with a vengeance – as I will be even closer to the deadline.

Like aspirin, policing must be put in its place. There is a fundamental fallacy underlying most discussions of policing, indeed of criminal justice policy generally. It is a confusion of the micro and the macro social levels of analysis; extrapolating what is true of individual cases to society as a whole. It is of the greatest importance, morally and practically, that justice is achieved in as many cases of crime as possible. Smarter and indeed tougher tactics that achieve that (without disproportionate violations of human rights) are unequivocally welcome, exactly as the commonsense view has it. But it does not follow that police reform is the most effective, or indeed even a possible, way of bringing crime down overall, substantially and in the long-run.

There are inherent limitations to the possibilities of crime control through policing. The drivers of crime and disorder largely lie much deeper than any possibility of being tackled by even the best police. Classic American and British research on traditional police tactics suggested decades ago that traditional policing had limited effect on crime levels. This was not due to police incompetence. As Mike Hough and others have shown, given the huge array of potential targets they are charged with protecting, even if every cop on the beat had Sherlock's deductive genius plus Jack Bauer's



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ruthlessness, they could not have much impact on overall crime levels.

True, several studies in the last twenty years have shown that police organisations overall, can make a serious difference to crime in such locations by using smarter intelligence and evidence-led tactics, and by directing scarce resources systematically to identified 'hot spots'. How much these and other innovative tactics account for the overall crime drop in the USA and elsewhere since the mid-1990s remains vigorously disputed, however (as I discuss in the booklet). Smarter crime prevention and policing did succeed in holding the lid down on the smouldering criminogenic pressure cooker of an increasingly divided and unequal society in the 1990s and 2000s, as criminology largely became 'liddology', the pursuit of better lid design. But optimism about the crime control potential of even the smartest tactics keeping the peace in the face of mounting economic and social collapse is merely wishful thinking.

The recent [riots in summer 2011](#) are a criminological Rorschach test, which different perspectives have read in conflicting ways. They do show, however, that the underlying socio-economically rooted pressures generating criminality had been suppressed, but not tackled, by the decades of getting tough on crime but not its causes. When the lid was suddenly lifted, many took advantage.

Changing police numbers and/or tactics *can* impact on crime, *pace* the 'nothing works' conclusion of many in the 1970s and 80s. But this is largely through symptom suppression, creating space for more radical attacks on the root causes of crime (as happened in the later 19<sup>th</sup>c. and much of the 20<sup>th</sup>) that needs to be filled by social and economic policy. The most important address for crime control is not Scotland Yard but 11 Downing Street.

Police should not be thought of primarily as a means of crime control. This creates unrealistic expectations and diverts attention from their more fundamental peacekeeping role. The police are hugely in demand for emergency interventions (as what Maurice Punch called a 'hidden social service'), potentially requiring legitimate coercion, including but not primarily, attending crime scenes. An emergency call to an OAP with heart problems who has not been answering calls from anxious relatives may (rarely) find a burglary victim knocked unconscious. More likely it will reveal a sick and helpless patient in need, or even a jolly person returning late from Bingo. But all are emergencies requiring, in the first place at any rate, police attention.

This seldom requires the full panoply of flashing blue lights, sirens and screaming tires that pejoratively attract the label fire brigade policing. How to limit these dramatic paraphernalia of fire-brigade policing only to the occasions when they are necessary and proportionate raises the same tough regulatory issues as restricting the core police resource of legitimate force.

But seeing the police role as analogous to the fire brigade, as an emergency service, fits what is the predominant effective demand for them (as demonstrated last year by Greater Manchester Police's 'tweet' day, when they published on Twitter all the emergency calls made to them over 24 hours). It sets achievable goals of providing good enough provisional resolutions wherever possible, and triage for major problems requiring other sorts of longer term or specialist intervention.

As the Raymond Chandler quote above claims, police offer vital short-term symptom relief, but not cures. Ultimately the police can only contribute to social pacification in conjunction with broader policies spreading inclusive citizenship and social justice.

The growth of UK Uncut, the world-wide Occupy movement and other forms of resistance to the continuation of the neo-liberal economic policies that have [undermined justice, and hence peace and security](#), offers some hope of improvement. This is further bolstered by the indications of support for the protestors' grievances from within the heart of the establishment, from leaders of the Church to the *Financial Times*. Even Middle England's Bible, the *Daily Mail* has railed against fat cats and bankers' bonuses with a zeal usually associated with *Socialist Worker*. As yet however there has been little reflection in criminological or criminal justice policy discussion of the possibility that the neo-liberal heyday may be passing.

What if... policing and criminal justice discussions saw the wisdom of earlier – tacitly social democratic perspectives – which acknowledged the limits of policing and punishment in the absence of social justice?

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