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Volunteers in Policing: a vehicle for increased representativeness in policing?

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Introduction

Any police service that states it works within a democratic policing model should be representative of the community that they police. This is also a fundamental understanding of the community policing model, which it is claimed is the model in use throughout England and Wales. This model involves the inclusion of all members of society in the decision-making process regarding how communities are policed and influences policing priorities at a local level.

Indeed, the National Police Chiefs' Council /Association of Police and Crime Commissioners 'Policing Vision 2025' states that, by the fast-approaching 2025, policing will be a profession with a more representative workforce that will align the right skills, powers and experiences to meet challenging requirements. In addition, its targets include "To create a culture that values difference and diversity" "... Attract and retain a workforce.... (that) will better reflect its communities" and "Continuing work to build a culture which values difference....".

Such a need to do more to embed equality, diversity and inclusion within policing is echoed by the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Strategy 2018-2025.

The NPCC continue to acknowledge that the service needs to better understand the communities served whilst acknowledging the benefits of a workforce which represents these communities. It stands to reason that this can only be achieved by actively recruiting individuals with characteristics currently under-represented within the service.

Representation in policing

However, this is easier said than done. The current situation regarding under-representation across a range of characteristics in policing is a stark reminder that much must be done to increase representativeness of the workforce. For example, the reported ethnicity of over 135,000 full-time equivalent police officers (March 2021) is nearly 93% white, with 3.4% describing themselves as Asian and only 1.3% describe themselves Black. Although reporting higher representation than police officers, 92% of slightly over 75,000 police staff and designated officers describe themselves as white, with 8% describing themselves as Black, Asian or other ethnic minority group. The corresponding figures for the general population are 86% white, 6.8% Asian and 3.3% Black. This is not a new phenomenon, issues of trust, reported police misuse of their powers against certain minority groups, and revelations regarding police cultural views all add up to discourage the required range of applicants for the police service.

How then can the police service attract more applicants with under-represented characteristics, whilst improving trust and influencing the perceptions of certain groups towards the police occupational sub-culture?

One way could be the continued encouragement and support for the recruitment of volunteers in policing from such under-represented groups.

Volunteering in Policing.

The use of volunteers in policing is not a new. For example, the use of volunteer special constables in emergencies goes back well before the introduction of the so-called modern police with the introduction of the Metropolitan Police Act of 1829. Today special constables are not the only volunteers in policing. Police Support Volunteers (PSVs) donate their time ranging from providing front counter services and administration to following up crime reports with the public, the Volunteer Police Cadet (VPC) scheme engages young people to support their local community, learn citizenship skills and have a voice.

The use of such volunteers has been seen as a way of increasing confidence in policing and of forming a bridge between communities and the police. Voluntary roles often report higher representation from minority groups than the policing workforce, for example, 12.7% of special constables, who reported their ethnicity, describe themselves as Black, Asian or minority ethnic, with slightly over 25% of cadets in the VPC scheme reporting the same.

However, if this 'bridge' of volunteers merely represents the predominant demographic within policing, even more so if only in specific localities, then change and perceptions of under-represented groups are not likely to evolve easily. Nether will there likely be an increase in an understanding of community trust and needs, or applications for the service from such groups.

To continue to use volunteers as a means of representing and understanding of the community, it is imperative that the recruitment of volunteers in policing for all available roles, across all geographic areas, throughout the police service should continue with a focus on recruiting more representativeness.