The Training of Uniformed Police Volunteers to Utilize Evidence-Based Policing: An Insight from Volunteer Special Constables in England and Wales

Abstract

This research examines if uniformed police volunteers, called "special constables" across England and Wales, are trained to understand and utilise evidence-based policing (EBP) in their volunteering. As the Government across the United Kingdom focuses on neighbourhood policing, the special constabulary is key in enacting such activities within communities. The research used an anonymous online questionnaire, collecting data from 129 volunteer special constables across four different rural and urban police forces in England and Wales. The findings demonstrate that most respondents had received little training relating to EBP, however nearly two thirds of the respondents used EBP regularly. Despite national learning programmes, the data suggests that special constables may not be receiving similar opportunities for training as their regular police officer counterparts yet are still expected to both support and complete similar policing tasks. The paper concludes discussing the implications on EBP training for volunteers and areas for future research.

Keywords

Volunteer Policing, Special Constables, Training, Evidence-based Policing, Community Policing

Fundamental to the democratic policing model utilized in liberal democratic societies across the world, policing requires the ability to engage and build trust with communities in order to collaboratively resolve problems. One core method of connecting with communities in England and Wales are Neighbourhood Policing Teams (NPTs). These teams of police officers, police staff, community support officers and volunteers support policing within local communities and are essential in achieving many aspects of contemporary policing including promoting community safety, preventing crime and anti-social behaviour, protecting the vulnerable and creating communities which are resilient (College of Policing, 2021).

NPTs are intrinsically guided and informed by the principles of community policing. "Community policing" is a concept developed to reduce division and build trust between the public and the police, hoping to address problems that could not be solved by traditional problem-oriented policing models. The components of community policing include a proactive problem-solving approach which builds on partnerships and trust with the public (Shupard & Kearns, 2019). Despite some criticisms of the approach (Garland, 1996; Skogan, 2004; Rogers, 2017), it remains an enduring strategy for police organizations across the globe and has encouraged international research into its use. For example, Maquire et al. (2019) suggest that for community policing to be effective, it requires developing partnerships, proactive problem-solving, and organizational transformation. However, Kammersgaard et al. (2023) discuss some of the challenges facing the drive to embed community policing into Danish neighbourhoods including cultural, trust, and application problems.

In times of increased demands for service, reducing budgets and resources, special constables, unpaid uniformed police volunteers who have the same policing powers and responsibilities as their regular police officer counterparts while on duty, support the delivery of policing in England and Wales, in particular within community policing (Plimley &

Krahenbuhl, 2019). The Government in the UK have announced a 'Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee' with significant financial and resource investments in neighbourhood policing, including 13,000 police officers, community support officers and volunteer special constables to provide a visible presence in communities reducing anti-social behaviour and criminality (UK Home Office, 2024a).

In addition to the Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee, the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) aims to set strategic direction in policing and facilitate progress through coordination, collaboration and communication. The NPCC is a national organization in the United Kingdom (UK) which brings together executive and senior leaders (such as Chief Constables) from policing in England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, the military, a number of British Overseas Territories and professional partners such as the College of Policing. Amongst the key tasks set for the special constabulary by the NPCC include engaging with communities and building public confidence in policing (NPCC, 2018). Previous literature points to a rise in positive community interaction that occurs with the use of volunteer policing units, including an increase in the public's confidence in the police (Gravelle & Rogers, 2010) and a possible increase in community cohesion (Phillips, 2013). Volunteers also help police to be more responsive to diverse community needs (Cherney & Chui, 2011) and work to solve community problems.

As the national professional body for policing across England and Wales, The College of Policing (2021) has produced guidelines which suggest that in order for NPTs to solve local problems, those involved must be able to interpret the evidence base on which policing is built and utilize this to assist in developing innovative responses to local issues. The use of evidence to inform policing practice has a long and ongoing history, with the term 'evidence-based policing (EBP)' being commonly attributed to Sherman (1998). Evidence-based Policing (EBP) is the practice of using data, empirical evidence and scholarly work to guide

decision-making within policing and criminal justice communities. EBP relies on proven methods and strategies rather than on assumption, intuition, or anecdotal evidence to inform policing strategies. EBP, like the popular Problem-oriented Policing (POP), intends to improve the outcomes of policing. Neither EBP nor POP are specific theories about crime nor are they specific police tactics. They are, however, a larger overarching framework for how the police should increase effectiveness, efficiency, and objectivity (Bullock et al., 2022). Contemporary policing is now striving through multiple means to strengthen and embed the adoption and daily application of an evidence-based approach to the provision of services (Pepper et al., 2020).

As volunteer representatives of local communities, it is crucial that special constables are embedded within NPTs, as well as supporting broader policing, but limited research has been conducted into the training and utilization of EBP by these unpaid uniformed police volunteers. This is an important consideration, as those who are working in this volunteer role perform similar functions and roles as some of their regular police colleagues, all of whom are working with evidence-based guidelines attempting to connect better with communities in a bid to resolve perennial local problems.

Review of the Literature on Volunteer Policing

Understanding the Concepts of Volunteer Policing Throughout the World

Across England and Wales, volunteers are integral within policing and provide welcome additional resources. However, volunteers in policing are also utilized worldwide and are seen as a low-cost option to support the role of policing. For example, in Sweden, volunteers in policing are seen as a visible link between citizens, their communities, and the police (Uhnoo & Löfstrand, 2018). In the USA, the use of volunteers in policing and law enforcement has a long history (Greenberg, 2005) and can be seen as a means of building

links to wider communities (Dobrin & Wolf, 2016). In Canada, volunteers are viewed as a means to improve community relations (O'Connor et al., 2022). Policing volunteers can also be found in Singapore, Australia, Malaysia, Hong Kong, the Bahamas, the Cayman Islands, and many other locations with a history of British influence, each having developed similarly but with a local character driven by different laws, rules, and needs (Wolf & Bryer, 2019). Similar policing can also be found in countries without British heritage, including positions with diverse pay scales and volunteer roles, including France, South Korea, China, Russia, Israel, Hungary, Germany, and the Netherlands (Bartels, 2014; see also: FIEP, 2011; Mayorov & Wolf, 2016). Policing agencies recognize the value that volunteers can provide, expanding the ability of paid employees to be effective in meeting public demands for services. Although not cost-free, community members who volunteer for what could be described as traditionally paid roles, are used to stretch limited budgets, increase the level of service to communities, and be an important positive nexus between the police and the public (Fredericksen & Levin, 2004; Pepper & Wolf, 2015). Some of these varying models of volunteer policing are explored in the paragraphs below.

In the United States, the roles of volunteers in policing vary significantly between agencies and whether the volunteers have the governmental authority to arrest. These policing volunteers have different titles, responsibilities, training, and authority depending on the state and locality, but are typically called reserve or auxiliary police officers. They may also be called other titles, including special deputy, special constable, or peace officer. Because of the vast decentralization in the United States of policing agencies, jurisdictions, and policies, it is clear from the literature that it is not possible to create a standard definition of volunteer police in the United States (Dobrin et al., 2019). On one end of the scale of police volunteers in the USA are agencies who utilize volunteer police like the New York Police Auxiliary, who wear a uniform similar to full-time New York City officers but have no

arrest powers and no legal authority as police officers. On the other end of this scale are US policing agencies where volunteer police function like those in the Los Angeles California Police Department or the Orange County Florida Sheriff's Office, having the same responsibilities, authority, uniform, and functions as full-time officers, including the legal authority of arrest (Wolf et al., 2016).

In Canada, volunteer police are known mostly as auxiliary police. They have very limited policing powers and often have uniforms that help distinguish them from regular officers. As an example of volunteer policing in Canada, the Toronto Police Auxiliary wear uniforms that are slightly different than those of regular Toronto police. A significant difference between the auxiliary and regular Toronto police is that regular police carry firearms whereas auxiliary police are unarmed. Instead of a solid red band on their hats, auxiliaries wear a checked red and black band, and instead of a dark blue shirt, auxiliary shirts are light blue and have "Auxiliary Officer" on their arm patch. Auxiliary police assist in crime prevention programs, special events, parades, toy drives, and other community events and may also be called on to provide a security presence and operate Toronto Police information booths and community police offices (Wolf & Jones, 2018). In addition to auxiliary police, several police services have begun Citizens on Patrol programs where volunteers act as the 'eyes and ears' of the police. These volunteers focus on patrolling communities, crime prevention initiatives, and identifying issues and reporting them to the police. They do not actively intervene in incidents and are not in uniform but are visible as Citizens on Patrol (wearing a yellow vest) and have no police powers.

Related to the context of this current study, across the 43 territorially focused police forces covering England and Wales, policing services are provided by slightly over 147,000 police officers, 86,000 staff and community support officers. These employees are supplemented on the frontline by 6,841 uniformed volunteer special constables (UK Home

Office, 2024b), who when on duty, have the same powers and responsibilities, as a warranted regular police officer. The primary function of special constables across England and Wales is to support, work alongside and supplement the duties of regular police officers (Wolf et al., 2017). O'Reilly et al. (2022) describe how residents within a community made little distinction between special constables and their regular police officer counterparts.

The special constabulary has a long history of voluntarily supporting policing, with the number of special constables reaching a peak of 180,000 at the outbreak of WW2 (Seth, 1961). The College of Policing (2020a) highlight how a key strength of the contemporary special constabulary is that its volunteer members are from local communities in which they live, work, relax, and volunteer, which as a result assists in establishing, understanding, and building links between the police service and local communities. In the unlikely event that all of these trained uniformed volunteers came on duty at the same time, they could provide an additional 5.5% staffing to the frontline police workforce.

Volunteer programs supporting policing are often considered by the service to be low-cost options, which is true when compared to the costs of recruiting, training, equipping, and paying salaries and associated benefits of a full-time position. However, the resource commitments required to recruit, train, equip, develop, and manage sustainable volunteer programs are regularly underestimated (Pepper, 2022). For example, the Metropolitan Police (2022) calculated in 2021 that it cost £3,889 to recruit and train a single special constable. With one force reporting an annual budget in 2024 of £46,000 to run their special constabulary consisting of 273 special constables (West Yorkshire Police, 2024). Whereas, on average it has been calculated that it costs £74,886 to recruit, pay, train, and equip a single new regular police officer (West Midlands Police, 2020). Although expenditure is significantly different between recruiting and training the volunteer and the regular officer, the use of the special constabulary is not without notable costs.

Across England and Wales, there are four routes of entry to joining the police service as a regular police officer, which creates some complexity for both applicants and the service. All of these routes are however underpinned by the National Policing Curriculum (NPC) and Police Constable Entry Routes (PCER) framework. The first possible route of entry for a new recruit is the police constable degree apprenticeship (PCDA). The PCDA is studied over three years in a partnership between a higher education partner and a police force, the second route is the degree holder entry program (DHEP), studied over two years, and also taught in a partnership between police forces and higher education providers, with both the PCDA and DHEP achieving a level 6 (degree level) award. These education and training programs have embedded within them a number of core themes in their curriculum, including problem-solving, critical thinking, decision making and evidence-based policing (EBP) (College of Policing, 2020b). The intent of these programs is the development of the learner's knowledge, understanding, and practical application of such skills in the workplace. The third route is a three-year professional policing degree taught solely within higher education for students who aspire to join the police but have not yet been recruited or employed. This pathway also has the core themes embedded throughout, with the exception being that, unlike the PCDA and DHEP, there is no workplace application. Since 2024, new police recruits in some forces study a non-educational award bearing training program, the Police Constable Entry Program (PCEP) which is aligned to the NPC and taught over two years 'in-house' by force trainers. The PCEP has a workplace focus from the outset, with coverage of the core themes generally present but focused on workplace application.

Understanding Evidence-Based Policing

Evidence-based Policing (EBP) can trace its roots to the evidence-based movement in the 19th century, which was first tied to the field of medicine. The notion of utilizing evidence

to drive practice then expanded to other fields such as social work and education. These earlier practices of the integration of evidence included a three-pronged approach, promoting the integration of the best evidence available, the judgment of the professional, and client values (Klose, 2024).

Bullock et al. (2022) suggest that the growing emphasis on an evidence-based approach to policing should aid the better use of problem-solving within policing. It must however be acknowledged that there continue to be a number of challenges to embedding EBP into workplace practice by regular officers including a perceived lack of time and resources; awareness and ability; and challenges relating to structure and the police culture (Selby-Fell & Newton, 2022). Given this, den Heyer (2022) suggests that the police need to take more ownership of evidence-based research in order to better inform resolutions to policing problems. As the police become more involved in the research which informs EBP, they start to value it more (den Heyer, 2022).

Whereas EBP has grown as a recognized practice in policing, so has it grown in academic literature and interest. For example, journals such as the "Cambridge Journal of Evidence-Based Policing" and George Mason University's "Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy" strive to integrate evidence with professional judgement and community values. In addition, societies of evidence-based policing have emerged in the UK (SEBP) as well as in the US (ASEBP), Canada (Can-SEBP), and Australia and New Zealand (ANZSEBP). While the merits of EBP have been lauded and debated, police officers across England and Wales are generally required to learn about EBP and understand it (Klose, 2024), yet its wholesale adoption and integration as a policing philosophy continues to evolve (Pepper et al., 2020).

The Training of Special Constables in England and Wales to Understand and Apply EBP

In contrast to multiple routes of training and education for regular new police officers, the special constables initial learning, called the Special Constables Learning Program (SCLP) was launched in 2020 and is a standardized College of Policing program based on the NPC and mapped to the first year of a regular police officers PCDA initial learning. This is an aspect called for by respondents in research conducted by Britton et al. (2022). The SCLP is however currently not mandated, and forces can choose to deviate from the program to meet local needs. The special constables initial learning program (in whichever form), is by necessity, usually taught by police force trainers either part-time or by block delivery, although Britton et al. (2022) discuss the balance that needs to be struck during the training between the time available and the depth of subjects taught.

On average new special constables can achieve the status of 'directed patrol', which means policing whilst supervised either on their own or as a team member, in approximately 18-24 months of part-time learning and volunteer workplace application. Special constables can then opt to continue and complete phase 2 learning to become a 'qualified special constable' studying and evidencing their ability over a number of months or years in one policing area or across several policing areas, including response policing, information and intelligence and policing communities. As a result, special constables can achieve parity with the Independent Patrol Status (IPS) required of regular police constables within their first year and therefore become an independent deployable policing resource (College of Policing, 2020c).

However, although there are four learning outcomes within the current program focusing upon explaining, identifying, evaluating and applying sources of EBP, there are limited opportunities across the whole special constables learning program and beyond to

fully understand, embrace, and importantly apply EBP. It is also worthy of note that Britton et al. (2022) report that this group of policing volunteers generally felt that their training lacked opportunities to put theory into practice. Such application and integration into workplace practice is an essential component given that special constables need to interpret and utilize the best available evidence to solve community problems in their voluntary role. Previous learning programs for these policing volunteers (such as the Initial Learning for Special Constables) had even less reference to EBP and its professional application. Given the importance of the role of special constables in delivering policing in a complex society and the expectations of their role, it is important to understand their perceptions of the utilization of evidence-based decision-making in policing across England and Wales.

Methodology

Following ethical approval from the university and gaining formal permissions from the four forces senior leadership, the researchers, in consultation with representatives from police forces involved across England and Wales, developed, piloted (also ensuring access through secure police computer systems) and administered an online survey to volunteer special constables across four police forces. The forces volunteering the involvement of their special constables represent a range of both rural and urban forces in the North, Central, East, and West of England and Wales, with between them 19,112 regular police officers (UK Home Office, 2025) and 746 special constables (UK Home Office, 2024b).

After an introductory email to the special constables, the online self-completion questionnaires, individual informed consent forms and participant information sheets were administered to the 746 special constables who were reported as volunteering across the four forces involved (UK Home Office, 2024b). Participants were asked to take part voluntarily, had their anonymity assured and informed of the right to withdraw their responses. They

were then requested to complete the questionnaire which was administered through the internet-based software Vevox. Vevox is a real-time online data-gathering system which enables educators and researchers to gather data and learner feedback in real time for a range of uses (Jenkins & Maidment, 2024). This approach enabled the respondent to have the freedom to complete the survey without the sight of any possible gatekeepers. Following initial distribution and a short delay, a follow-up email was also sent to participants encouraging completion.

The questionnaire was constructed to gather background demographic information of the respondents, then using a blend of open questions, closed questions and free text boxes, explored a range of topics relating to participants' understanding and application of EBP in their volunteer policing role. It was piloted using special constables' coordinators within the forces involved to ensure clarity and understanding. All of the completed and returned questionnaires were anonymized automatically and the findings combined to ensure that no individual could be identified, although, each force could be identified so that response rates could be monitored. All of the findings were analyzed by the researchers who throughout were aware of the possible impacts of bias. The quantitative findings present descriptive statistics as to the state of knowledge surrounding EBP, whereas the qualitative findings from open-ended questions were used to help provide context to the quantitative findings where appropriate.

The benefits of conducting the research using online methodologies are often explained as providing an economical way of gathering data and information from geographically spread sample groups. This was an important aspect of this research as the online survey enabled the gathering of data and information from four geographical areas spread across England and Wales, including urban and rural police forces. However, as Kearns and Nix (2023) discuss, it can be markedly challenging to gather data from officers

across a number of departments. In addition, as the special constables volunteer at various times throughout the week, the online survey was utilised to allow respondents to complete the questionnaire flexibly at a time of their choosing. From the total population of 6,841 special constables reported as volunteering across England and Wales (UK Home Office, 2024b), the survey was distributed to 746 possible respondents in four police forces, representing slightly under 11% of the total number of special constables serving.

Findings

Of the 746 questionnaires distributed to special constables across the four forces, 129 were returned, providing a total response rate of 17.29%.

Table 1: Demographics of respondents

<Insert Table 1 about here>

The survey respondents were three-quarters male (75.2%) (see Table 1). This was not surprising as policing is traditionally a male-dominated field, and although the balance between male and female officers is slowly adjusting, the UK Home Office (2024b) report how the regular service nationally is 65.3% male and locally across the four forces involved 63.2% male (UK Home Office, 2025). There is limited national data available for the special constabulary, although across the four forces involved, similar to the findings of the current survey, statistics suggest that the special constabulary is 73.3% male (UK Home Office, 2025). However, respondents in this survey exceeded both the regular service nationally and locally by almost 10%. It is not clear why and this would benefit from much further exploration. The largest number of respondents, over a quarter (27.9%), were in the age range of 25-34, with in total almost three-quarters of respondents (73.6%) aged between 25 and 54. In contrast, only 14.7% were aged 18 to 24 , 10.1% of respondents were 55 to 64 years of age

and only 1.6% of respondents were over 65, with no female respondents over 55, this would also be worthy of further research. Nationally, the UK Home Office (2024b) reports 8.7% of special constables are over 55 years of age. The ages of volunteering in the current survey deviate from policing national figures, but in part support the national figures for volunteering in the public sector reported by McGarvey et al. (2020). The only exception was those over 65, where public sector volunteering rises quite noticeably, whereas in the current research it is significantly lower.

This is not surprising as although there is no upper age limit for applying or serving with the special constabulary, the individual must have the physical ability, meet health requirements, and have permission from the force to continue into later years. There is however an opportunity to recruit more mature special constables who can meet the required standards and bring with them life and/or policing experience. In addition, McGarvey et al. (2020) discuss how age ranges for volunteering differ with respect to the role, singling out the special constabulary where volunteering numbers are at their peak in volunteers' early twenties. This is not the case in the current research, where numbers peak in the volunteers' late twenties and early thirties. Noticeably, from the special constable respondents, those reporting more than five years' service were slightly over 30% male and only 2.3% female. In total, 78.3% of respondents report their ethnicity as white British, English or Welsh, with 13.9% reporting their ethnicity from underrepresented groups within English and Welsh society, and interestingly 7.8% preferred not to say or did not respond. Variations in both age and ethnicity reported should be explored, as responses may be due to numerous factors including those who chose to respond to the survey, an indication of changing trends in volunteering as special constables, or special constables being recruited to the regular police service.

It is also worthy to note that 38.8% of respondents held graduate or postgraduate level qualifications, 2.3% foundation level degrees (or similar), along with an additional 21.7% 'A' levels (or equivalent). This evidence's how slightly over 62% of special constables who responded have the demonstrable ability to study at an educational level appropriate to access the SCLP as either the next stepping stone in their life-long learning journey, or at an educational level equivalent to or exceeded by their existing qualifications.

Table 2: Voluntary policing role of respondents

<Insert Table 2 about here>

In total over three-quarters of the respondents (79.8%) self-reported as frontline special constables (see Table 2), consisting of 60.4% male, 16.2% female, 1.6% other and 1.6% did not respond. This is as opposed to 91.1% of regular officers performing frontline visible and non-visible roles (UK Home Office, 2024b). The findings of this survey are not surprising given the structure of units within forces, as the special constabulary often have their own immediate first-line leaders (supervisors/team leaders), with 11.6% of respondents reporting being a first-line leader. The remainder self-reporting as middle managers, senior managers, or executive level (5.5%), a small number (3.2%) either reporting 'other' or not providing a response. Again, the divide between male and female respondents was noticeable, with only 1.6% of female special constables reporting being in first-line leadership roles and non in middle manager, senior manager, or executive level roles, this is far below the 6.3% of regular female police officers being in leadership roles across the four forces involved in the survey (UK Home Office, 2025). Perhaps the survey responses can be attributed to the very limited number of female special constables reporting more than five years' service, or the limited number of female responses to the survey but is certainly worthy of further exploration.

It is likely moving forward that frontline volunteering as special constables will be in a neighbourhood context supporting the policy change of the Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee (UK Home Office, 2024a), in which the requirement for evidence-based problem-solving will come much more to the fore.

Figure 1: Respondents receipt of specific training in evidence-based policing

<Insert Figure 1 about here>

Respondents indicated overwhelmingly that they did not identify specific training that they had received in evidence-based policing. Over 86% indicated that they had not been trained in EBP, while only 7.7% indicated that they had received such training, and another 4.6% indicated that they had signed up to receive specific EBP training. This indicates a significant lack of training not only in the understanding but importantly the application of EBP, as special constables across varying lengths of service report they have not received specific training, the vast majority of whom (79.8%) volunteer on the frontline. One respondent commented in the free text how *'there was a lack of practical training on evidence-based policing or its application. I have picked it up 'on the job' alongside my study when training for the SC [special constables] role'* and another respondent noted *'I have not been provided with any specific EBP training from the police force, but within my full-time occupation I use EBP'*.

Of the 129 respondents, almost two thirds (62%) replied that as volunteers they used EBP regularly, with two respondents describing how they learned about EBP in their professional employment within either healthcare or academia, both respondents commenting though how they transferred this knowledge to their voluntary role. It is worthy to note that all new police recruits across England and Wales have EBP and problem-solving embedded as a thread within their initial learning programs with a number of forces also delivering EBP

workshops for existing officers and police staff. Whereas EBP has only recently been included in the special constables initial learning program, which is of a much more condensed duration. The ability of special constables to attend in-force delivered workshops for the regular service is unknown.

This may be reflected in the current research where almost half of respondents (45.7%) reported being not sure if they used EBP and/or had not heard of the term. Free text comments include *'Unsure what term [EBP] means',* '*It's not something I've heard of*' and '*No idea*', suggest a lack of knowledge and understanding of what EBP is and its use. Others commented *'I haven't received specific [EBP]training'* and *'Not been offered any training'*. Such limited exposure to, and understanding, of the concept of EBP could have led to some confusion as to what it constitutes, with a few free text comments discussing EBP as '*utilizing best evidence to detect crimes'* and '*acting on evidence to investigate crimes'.* This may indicate a lack of a comprehensive and shared understanding in some cases. As Blaskovits et al. (2020) discuss, although in their research, Canadian police officers are aware of the term EBP, this does not necessarily translate to an effective understanding of its application. Although there is interest in learning more about EBP, with one leader reporting how *'I would like to get training for my officers on EBP as I believe it can be a very effective tool'.* This indicates an important aspect, some special constables in leadership positions champion the value and use of EBP, this being crucial for its adoption to be successful.

Discussion

Policing should represent wider society, with the special constabulary sometimes held up as an organisation increasing representativeness, yet responses in the current research suggest that there is underrepresentation of female special constables in certain aspects of volunteer policing. For example, the very limited number of female special constables in

leadership roles. This aligns with the findings of Somers et al. (2024) that regular female officers are underrepresented in leadership roles within a US police department, and lack of training can impact upon promotion. There is a call for further research in this area (Somers et al., 2024), this is supported by the current researchers who suggest extending such research to volunteer policing, even if initially this is in an exploratory way to influence the building of an evidence base.

The new special constables learning program across England and Wales, develops knowledge and understanding of EBP, but had only been launched approximately two years prior to the data being collected. As the SCLP is the equivalent to the first year of an undergraduate degree (the PCDA), evidence from the current research suggests, from previous qualifications achieved, that well over half of the respondents (62%) should be able to successfully study at this education and training level. However, slightly over a third (37%) who hold qualifications such as GCSE's or no qualifications, may need additional education and training support to successfully study the SCLP. At the time of data collection, less than half of the special constables responding to the survey will have had the opportunity to study the new program, and that is assuming that all of the forces involved in the research, all of whom are empowered by the College of Policing to deliver the program, in part or full, transitioned to the new delivery straight away in 2020. Although the transference of learning to workplace practice has not been measured within this current exploratory research project, knowledge and a common understanding of what constitutes EBP could be addressed with formal education and training.

In their strategic plan, the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC, 2018) identifies the need for additional training and professional development to both enhance and make the most of the capability of volunteer special constables. Britton et al. (2022) report that special constables sought training focused on more practical activities, dealing with situations they

would face while volunteering. Beyond their initial training, Plimley and Krahenbuhl (2019) also report how existing special constables continue to find it difficult to access appropriate courses as they were either unavailable at the right times for those with work commitments or other responsibilities, or just hard to obtain. An alternate voluntary role within policing in England and Wales, the police support volunteer, involves donating time (usually in the 'back-office') to conduct tasks which complement those of police officers and staff; however, they also report limited access to training and development (Pepper, 2022). Loik (2020) suggests extending the remit for those volunteering as assistant police officers, identifying that this would require additional training. Uhnoo and Löfstrand (2018) highlight how the lack of training and experience is often a recurring argument against the use of volunteers in policing, yet the lack of opportunities for training for volunteers also seems to have been identified within the current research.

Plimley and Krahenbuhl (2019) report how a lack of training can be a barrier to realizing the volunteer's full potential for supporting policing. O'Connor et al. (2022) also highlight how volunteers in policing reported both they and the service could benefit from additional and more frequent training. Selby-Fell and Newton (2022) found that there was not a shared understanding of EBP amongst police constables and staff, which is bound to lead to ambiguity in its application. If this is the case for regular employees, then this is also likely across the services' volunteers. As a result, in order to make the most of neighbourhood policing, all those involved, whether police constables, staff or volunteers, should receive learning and development in relation to EBP and its professional application. Otherwise, as McGarvey et al. (2020) discuss, the lack of specific training for public sector volunteers, in particular where others expect them to have such knowledge and understanding, can lead to frustrations that they cannot always fulfil the role as well as they wish.

Limitations and Areas of Future Research

These findings come with several limitations. Firstly, the sample is limited in terms of the ability to generalize results to the larger special constable's population of England and Wales. This is because the sample only represents a small proportion of the total number of special constables serving across England and Wales. It is worth noting that although the response rate was limited at 17.29%, it exceeds the response rates in the region of 13% achieved by den Heyer (2023) when researching regular police officers' adoption of EBP in England and Wales, and Rogers et al. (2022) when researching officers understanding and application of EBP in a several forces in England and Wales. Similarly, Blaskovits et al. (2020) report low response rates of under 10% to a survey exploring officers' receptivity to research across policing services in Canada, highlighting low response rates as an ongoing issue. Kearns and Nix (2023) reviewed response rates in 15 journal articles which focused on subjects aligned to evidence-based policing, intelligence-led policing, police misconduct or culture, as a result reporting wide variations in departmental response rates from 7% to 98%.

Future research should attempt to obtain a larger representative sample from across England and Wales so that findings can be confirmed. Thus, these descriptive findings should be considered preliminary. Secondly, the ability to conduct advanced analyses was limited due to the small sample size. More sophisticated analysis should be considered for future research. Finally, it should be noted that the results are self-reported by participants and that actual use of evidence-based policing may be different in practice.

The findings from this research point to additional opportunities for future research. These include an exploration of the changing trends nationally in the age, sex and ethnicity of special constables to assist in identifying what hinders and supports volunteering in policing, ensuring equality of opportunity for joining, learning, promotion and years of service. There

is a need to ensure that the impact of special constables volunteering in NPTs is measured and evaluated.

Overall, more research is needed on how EBP can be integrated and utilized throughout police forces, including volunteers, and the impact it could have on policing practices and dealing with problems within communities.

Policy Implications

Although England and Wales is amongst those at the forefront of attempting to integrate EBP into policing in a systematic way, there is still significant room for improvement. Volunteer police, in this case special constables, are one area where enhanced training in knowledge, understanding and uses of EBP are needed. Having volunteers using EBP to guide practices and decision-making could help ensure everyone in the police service is more seamlessly working together to accomplish their mission, such as volunteering within NPTs, engaging with communities and building public trust and confidence in policing. It could also enhance operational effectiveness and improve crime prevention. In addition, the provision of more opportunities for the training of volunteers at flexible times to enhance both their operational effectiveness and alignment to the regular service is needed. Finally, there is an opportunity for police leaders to better embed EBP across the whole police services in England and Wales by ensuring volunteers have improved access to EBP training at times and locations appropriate for volunteers.

Conclusion

Research on volunteer policing is still an emerging area of scholarship. Volunteer policing has been a part of policing for as long as there have been the police (Greenberg, 1984, 2005; Dobrin and Wolf, 2016; Dobrin, 2017), and although the last decade has seen an

uptick of interest from scholars, it continues to be a largely understudied area of policing. There is though continuing interest in the use of volunteers to support and supplement policing across many countries, the current descriptive research study is of value as it adds to a gradually growing body of literature. The research points to a difference that exists in the training of special constables across England and Wales in their knowledge and understanding of EBP when compared to the training received by their regular police counterparts. Such a lack of learning opportunities is probably due to a number of factors including not only finances but also the limited time that forces and special constables, often volunteering on evenings and weekends, can commit to such learning, whilst also acknowledging that such volunteers may have additional responsibilities which impact upon their abilities to donate time.

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Data Availability

Any questions relating to the data associated with this article should be directed to the corresponding author.

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