

Police Support Volunteers: Unrecognised and Under the Radar?

Police Support Volunteers (PSVs) are citizens who give their time freely to perform tasks that complement the duties of police officers and staff. Volunteers are a familiar presence in policing, with the most recognisable figure – the Special Constable – appearing just two years after the formation of the modern police service in 1829. However, PSVs are a relatively new addition to an established police volunteer history, emerging in forces throughout England and Wales from the 1990s onwards. According to the 2018 [benchmarking survey](#) conducted by the Institute for Public Safety, Crime and Justice (IPSCJ) – the only comprehensive and systematically collected data set available – there 8,265 PSVs in England and Wales. Unlike their Special Constable counterparts, PSVs (usually) do not wear a uniform. They are not warranted. There is no specific legislative framework that defines or directs their involvement (although the recent Policing and Crime Act 2017 makes reference to optional powers that can be conferred by Chief Constables). However, PSVs feature in every police service throughout England and Wales.

The IPSCJ survey highlights over 1,100 PSV role profiles across forces – from administration and community engagement activities to front counter duties, traffic speed checks, viewing CCTV footage, and other criminal investigation support - reflecting the diversity of the PSV contribution. However, despite the spread and significance of many of these roles, there is a *distinct lack of visibility* around PSVs – both in academic literature and the day-to-day delivery of policing ‘on the ground’. While PSVs in my PhD fieldwork often reported regular interactions with officers and staff, for others these exchanges were virtually non-existent. Where relationships were in place they were frequently positive; however, this rarely extended further than those officers and staff in direct contact with PSVs. This limited awareness of PSVs reaches beyond the police force payroll. Kindly folk who inquire about the subject of my PhD often tell me that they ‘know someone who is a Special Constable’, assuming that studies of volunteers in policing have only a single pool of potential research participants at their disposal. Talk of a further cohort of volunteers (in addition to the youngest volunteers in policing – cadets) is invariably met with surprise – not only from those outside of policing circles, but also scholars and practitioners from within the field. Reactions are a mixture of curiosity at why individuals choose to give their time in this way, interest in the roles that they undertake, and sometimes concern that elements of policing are delivered in a voluntary capacity.

PSVs in my study often framed their contribution in terms of freeing up officers or staff, serving the community, and the ‘gift’ of time and skills. Their ‘offering’ has potential to go beyond this – from ‘doing more’ to ‘doing better’ - with the volunteer presenting a different capability to that of the paid workforce. Their dual status – essentially an ‘outsider’ located ‘inside’ the organisation – brings a unique quality, particularly in terms of community engagement, an alternative perspective, and being less shackled by institutional bureaucracy inherent within the paid workforce. However, the currently limited visibility of PSVs has implications for how this contribution can be harnessed, the tasks they undertake, the difference they feel able to make, and their integration within the police service. These are issues that PSVs attach great importance to and are shown to be instrumental in their feelings of motivation, commitment, satisfaction, and intentions to give their time on an ongoing basis. If PSVs are set to continue to be part of the mixed economy of policing – and legislative changes in the Policing and Crime Act 2017 to support the designation of powers to volunteers would suggest they are - then people both within and outside of the police service need to be exposed to opportunities to see the areas of business they are involved in, and the

contribution they make. This requires an adequate infrastructure to support and develop PSVs and promote their place within policing. Without this, it is likely that PSVs will remain largely unrecognised and under the radar.