

BOOK REVIEW

Volunteer police, choosing to serve: exploring, comparing, and assessing volunteer policing in the United States and the United Kingdom, by Ross Wolf and Carol Borland Jones, New York, Routledge, 2018, 185pp. ISBN: 9781466564954

Volunteers make a sizable, yet often under exposed and under valued, contribution to policing in the United Kingdom (UK), United States (US), and beyond. This book from British academic Carol Borland Jones, and US academic and Reserve Chief Deputy Sheriff Ross Wolf, acknowledges the range of volunteer roles in policing (e.g., cadets, Police Support Volunteers (PSVs), and other citizen type initiatives such as Neighbourhood Watch schemes), but focuses on perhaps the most recognisable figure – the volunteer officer. In England and Wales known as the Special Constable, in the US the reserve (a term predominantly used in the west) or auxiliary (more commonly heard in the north east), and variations of each and other labels (e.g., civil guard) featuring across the globe, lack of consistent definition is the first issue to which this book turns.

Wolf and Borland Jones outline the challenges of defining concepts of volunteering more broadly, highlighting themes of obligation, remuneration, and environment. Waters are further muddied when applying volunteering in a *policing* context – another sometimes elusive term (acts of warranted officers only? Incorporating roles and responsibilities within the community, and private sector also?). Such debates are

compounded in comparative approaches where different ‘layers’ of policing are present – most notably in this study, the US police department and sheriff’s office. This opening chapter sets the scene for a field that at times lacks clarity, with variation and inconsistency proving to be common themes throughout the development and delivery of volunteer policing.

The book goes on to explore the history and current infrastructure of volunteer policing around the world, the reasons that individuals give their time (often related to service to the community, career development, or – more common in the US – an opportunity to keep in touch with the profession and share expertise after leaving or retiring from the force), the roles that volunteers undertake, and the contribution they make within them. It is to these matters that Wolf and Borland Jones dedicate their attentions throughout chapters two to six.

The benefits of involving volunteers in policing, according to Wolf and Borland Jones, are many and varied, including: enhanced services; improved connection, cooperation, and understanding between police and communities; opportunities to diversify the workforce make up (e.g., age, ethnicity); greater transparency (a contrast, the authors argue, to the “*veil of secrecy*” (p31) historically perceived between the police and communities); and a ready reserve workforce to backfill or multiply the force in times of need. However, benefits go beyond an ‘extra pair of hands’ or opportunities for community engagement, with Wolf and Borland Jones highlighting the specialist expertise amongst volunteer cohorts, including medical training, teaching skills, and financial and accounting experience. Indeed, as the

authors assert, “*the term ‘volunteer’ should not be confused with the term ‘amateur’*” (p3).

However, attempts to recognise, value, and capitalise on the skills that volunteers bring are not routine practice, particularly within UK forces which – despite recent efforts to involve highly trained individuals in tackling cybercrime, child exploitation, and cases that require technical, language, or cultural skills – have historically “*shunned*” the expertise of volunteers (p77). With markedly fewer former and retired full time officers returning to volunteer in the UK compared to the US, there is also the loss of corporate knowledge and expertise when officers’ careers end. Where volunteer skills are recognised, for example, through a rank structure, Wolf and Borland Jones suggest that full time paid officers will usually take authority, regardless of volunteer seniority.

This points to a lack of respect for some volunteer officers, “*discursive and disparaging*” attitudes from regulars (p75), and perceptions of ‘policing on the cheap’. This has led to challenges in terms of volunteers being accepted in both the UK and US, particularly by unions: while “*helping out*” is acceptable, attempts to “*play police officer*” are not (p51). The authors acknowledge the bravery and resilience of many volunteer officers; however, highlight that, when errors are made, it is the *volunteer status* under the microscope as well as (or, indeed, rather than) the poor decision, mistake, or action taken (p20). These challenges are compounded by a lack of awareness amongst the public of what volunteers in policing do, limited infrastructure to understand, support, and develop volunteer roles, and an absence of representation at senior level.

A clear theme throughout the book is the lack of consistency in how volunteers are tasked and involved in policing – brought into even sharper focus due to its comparative nature. While the UK has a fairly standard approach to Special Constable recruitment, training, and powers (one, it should be noted, that does not extend to other volunteers in policing, especially PSVs), there is broad variation throughout different US states and across other parts of the world. In Chapters 7 and 8, Wolf and Borland Jones present perhaps the most comprehensive account of volunteer policing across the globe documented to date, highlighting the many and varied ways in which different countries involve volunteer officers: full powers in the UK and Bermuda; some volunteers carrying firearms in Florida, Israel, and South Africa; civilian status of the New York Police Department auxiliary with a focus on reassurance and visibility; limited powers in Ireland and Russia; supervised authority in Toronto, Canada; Hong Kong auxiliaries who are paid a daily rate; the compulsory nature of service in Singapore; tourist and translation focused volunteers in Phuket, Thailand; and paid, sworn auxiliaries in Malaysia who operate in a manner perhaps more akin to private security arrangements.

Although, according to the authors, only a ‘snapshot’ of volunteer programmes across the globe (albeit one that seems more comprehensive than any presented elsewhere), this clearly underlines the diversity of volunteer policing in international context – ranging from limited or no authority, serving in a more general public reassurance and support capacity, and little (if any) financial recompense for subsistence and travel, to more specialist functions (e.g., mounted, underwater search and rescue), armed roles, full arrest powers, and earning potential through outsourced services. Differences also

extend to processes of recruitment and training, with some levels of standardisation in the UK, and sizable inconsistencies across US states, ranging from limited training to full academy accreditation.

Such diversity in operating and management practices (particularly in the US) has made attempts to develop a comprehensive, comparative evidence base around volunteer police a “*near impossible task*” (p147). Wolf and Borland Jones’ primary data collection – surveys conducted with volunteer officers in both the US and UK – represents one of the first attempts to compare volunteer policing on a larger scale; although results are skewed towards a small number of forces in both countries, with the US northeast states “*conspicuously absent*” (p108), perhaps indicative of their broader approach to police volunteers. Despite this, some clear themes emerge from the surveys, most notably in relation to volunteer motivations (serving the community, both in the UK and US), and a desire to be more involved in operational and investigatory type work (particularly amongst UK respondents).

The book concludes with a look to the future of volunteer policing. With the history of some volunteer programmes rooted in times of need (e.g., wars, natural disasters), Wolf and Borland Jones consider whether the current state of need – cuts in public sector spending, shifting concerns around threat, harm, and risk, and an increasingly complex and globalised police workload – will prompt a renewed era of development. The authors propose that thought is given to a tiered approach, with categories ranging from no powers to fully sworn volunteer officers. A national model such as this would offer local control, but allow for nationwide terminology and requirements around recruitment, training, management, and operation. While standardisation may

be challenging to meet for some forces, it can offer longer-term benefits of increased trust, improved public service, and fewer complaints.

Wolf and Borland Jones highlight a state of flux that currently faces volunteer officers in both the US and UK: while they are likely to continue to feature as part of the policing landscape, the ways in which they engage and operate going forward is less clear. Various factors are at play here including: enhanced roles for volunteer officers (e.g., in tackling cybercrime); implications for UK volunteers during the call for increased armed officers; mounting safety concerns; and continued debates around the tasks that volunteers undertake and the allowances available to them to secure a ready reserve in times of need. The cost of volunteer policing is also a consideration here: while inexpensive, uniforms, equipment, training, supervision, and coordination – some of which may increase as the technology that police use in their duties develops – mean that volunteer officers are far from ‘free’. However, the authors argue that, if forces are prepared to dedicate resources to such infrastructure, there is likely to be *“significant return on this investment”* (p165).

Engaging with these issues, and capitalising on the benefits that volunteer officers can bring, requires a more developed evidence base including both empirical research and – perhaps more urgently – standardised data collection to understand the scale and contribution of volunteer officers. Wolf and Borland Jones offer an important addition to this under researched space, while serving to highlight the considerable work that is still greatly needed here.