FYFE, N.R. and TERPSTRA, J. 2023. Researching police reform: experiences from Scotland and the Netherlands. In *Martin, D. and Tong, S. (eds.) Introduction to policing research: taking lessons from practice.* 2nd edition. London: Routledge [online], chapter 13, pages 199-209. Available from: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003276456-17

Researching police reform: experiences from Scotland and the Netherlands.

FYFE, N.R. and TERPSTRA, J.

2023

RESEARCHING POLICE REFORM

Experiences from Scotland and the Netherlands

Nicholas R Fyfe and Jan Terpstra

Introduction

Several countries in Northern and Western Europe over the past years have experienced fundamental transformations in the structure, organization and governance of their police systems (Fyfe, Terpstra & Tops, 2013), among them Scotland and the Netherlands. In these two countries, police reforms have had many similarities. Both reforms started in 2013 and involved a highly comparable change from a regionalized police system to a single national police force. In both countries, the police had had a strong traditional focus on local policing and local police governance, and so the transition to a nationalized police system can be understood as a radical break with the past that confronted the new police organizations with very similar questions and challenges (Fyfe & Scott, 2013; Terpstra, 2013).

Such major changes to the structural arrangements of policing have attracted significant research attention. Focusing on Scotland and the Netherlands, we explore the different types of research that have been undertaken in relation to reform. These studies are of different kinds, have taken place in different contexts and have involved different types of relationships with practitioners and policymakers. Drawing on our own involvement in researching police reform in Scotland and the Netherlands, we explore these different types of research and conclude by considering what, if any, impact research has had on the process of police reform (see too Fyfe and Richardson, 2018).

The Contexts and Contours of Police Reform

To put this research activity in context, it is first necessary to sketch out the contexts and contours of police reform in Scotland and the Netherlands. There are some significant similarities between these countries in terms of the background to the 2013 police reforms (see too Terpstra and Fyfe, 2014). In both countries, policing had previously been delivered by relatively autonomous regional forces (numbering 25 in the Netherlands and 8 in Scotland) and both countries had well-established traditions of local policing. Nevertheless, despite a strong focus on local policing, both countries had witnessed a gradual process of centralization in police decision-making over the previous 20 to 30 years. (Donnelly & Scott, 2010: 105–106; Fyfe & Scott, 2013; Cachet & Sey, 2013; Terpstra, 2020).

Despite the gradual processes of centralization in both countries, the decisions that led to establishing the national police forces in 2013 were taken remarkably quickly. In the Netherlands, although there had been some earlier unsuccessful proposals for a national police, the year 2010 proved to be a turning point, partly as a result of the loss of the dominant position of the Ministry of the Interior (that traditionally had a close relationship with local governments) (Terpstra, 2013), but also due to the cumulative impact of several policing crises relating partly to the failure of major IT projects and to a lack of progress in improving collaboration between the regional forces. Within six months of the election of a new government in 2010, the Lower Chamber of the Dutch Parliament had passed the bill for a national police force (Terpstra, 2013). In Scotland there was a similarly rapid process. The Minister of Justice had always publicly opposed structural reform of policing but when in 2010 the seriousness of the economic crisis for public spending in Scotland became apparent, a decision to explore options for reform was taken and within 18 months legislation to create a national police force was introduced and passed in the Scottish Parliament ~~force~~ (Fyfe & Scott, 2013; Fyfe, 2016). In each country, the political narrative of why reform was needed was similar. The regionalized structure of the police was viewed as fragmented and lacking in coordination, resulting in duplication of effort and an ineffective approach to major challenges such as organized crime and terrorism. In both countries the public and political debate triggered by the decision to create a national police force was also quite similar, focusing on the distribution of responsibilities between government and chief police officers, and the potentially negative consequences that a national police force might have for local policing.

The Role of Research in Preparing for Reform

How has research informed the processes leading to police reform in Scotland and the Netherlands? To understand the ways in which researchers have interacted with the police service in Scotland in relation to reform, it is important to place these relationships within the broader context of police-academic collaboration and the role of the Scottish Institute for Policing Research (SIPR). Established in 2007, SIPR is a consortium of universities in Scotland working in partnership with the police service and focused on capacity building, new research, and knowledge exchange (Fyfe and Wilson, 2012). The vision underpinning SIPR is strongly informed by a commitment to evidence-informed policy making which had come to the fore in the UK in late 1990s and much of SIPR's work therefore focuses on building a research base to inform policing policy and practice.

It was in the context of these relationships that, in January 2011, SIPR was approached by the police service to assist with examining the policy options for police reform. The background to this was the decision by the Scottish Government to explore the scope for a 'sustainable policing model'

in the face of looming budget cuts triggered by the economic crisis of 2007–8. Involving a team of civil servants and seconded police officers, the initial focus of the sustainable policing project was on three options: retaining the existing eight forces but requiring enhanced collaboration; creating three or four larger regional forces through mergers, and establishing a new national police force. SIPR was commissioned to undertake a 'rapid evidence review' to examine the key findings from research on the risk and benefits associated with the merger and restructuring of police organizations.

Led by Fyfe, the review drew together a wide body of research and 'grey literature' to assess the relationships between police force size, structure and performance, and the identification of the risks and lessons learned from past experiences of organizational change (a version of the report was subsequently published as Mendel, Fyfe and den Heyer, 2017). The review found no compelling evidence regarding the optimal size or structure of a police force. In fact, strong arguments can be made for both 'small is beautiful' (in terms of an emphasis on local priorities and close oversight by elected officials) and for 'consolidation' (in terms of achieving greater efficiency, the availability of resources to deal with major challenges and the capacity to deal with more complex issues, such as organized crime, terrorism, and cybercrime). The review also found that the available evidence on police mergers is limited and of variable quality. At the time the review was undertaken, there were, with the exception of Denmark, no attempts at systematic evaluations of the impact of mergers on police activity and public confidence and much of the evidence that did relate to force amalgamations was quite equivocal about its impact. Rarely was the research evidence of sufficient quality to provide a clear and robust answer to the questions of interest to policymakers about the effects of mergers on the delivery of local policing, the provision of specialist services, or governance and accountability. What the review did highlight, however, were the risks associated with mergers. There was evidence from the UK that previous amalgamations had led to a decline in public confidence with new organizations seen as being out of touch with local communities (Brain, 2010) and a perception among partner agencies that the police had become more hierarchical and centralized (Holmberg and Balvig, 2013).

Although the evidence review had indicated the lack of compelling evidence for mergers of police organizations and highlighted some significant risks, the view of policymakers involved with the reform process was unequivocal in its support of a national police force. The research would therefore appear to have had little immediate influence on the course of the policy debate around police reform in Scotland. It had offered no compelling evidence in favour of a national force and had highlighted some important risks associated with processes of merger and restructuring. But its significance in the process needs to be seen more in terms of its symbolic (rather than instrumental) value. The very act of commissioning 'expert knowledge' through research can be seen as a way of enhancing legitimacy by signalling the authority and validity of certain organizational decisions and processes in ways which meet the wider public and political expectations of what appropriate policy-making should be.

Unlike in Scotland, in the Netherlands no specific research was undertaken to inform the decision-making about the possibility of police reform. However, between the mid-1990s and about 2010, dozens of studies had shown the limitations and deficiencies of the regionalized police system that existed at that time. However, these studies did not provide a clear proposal for an alternative structure of the police system (Schaap & Terpstra, 2018). Political arguments, and the wish of the government to use the existing window of opportunity before it closed (Terpstra, 2013), were much more important than any contribution that research might have given to the political process of creating a national police.

Researching Reform in Action

On 1st April, the new national force, Police Scotland, became operational but very quickly became the focus of a fierce media and political debate. The Scottish Government maintained that the new force would strengthen connections between the police and local communities and end the 'postcode lottery' of access to specialist policing resources. Critics, by contrast, maintained that 'a one size fits all approach to policing' was emerging with a strong focus on enforcement and a significant local democratic deficit (see Fyfe, 2016). In this increasingly politicized environment, the Scottish Police Authority (SPA) (the organization that has responsibility for resourcing the police service, supporting continuous improvement, and holding the chief constable to account) began a programme of commissioning research focused on those issues around which there was greatest media and political interest, including stop and search and the deployment of armed officers on routine patrol. Accessing and using expert knowledge in these areas had important symbolic as well as instrumental dimensions. Both stop and search, and armed policing were highly contested policy domains in which Police Scotland maintained a strong position regarding the appropriateness of their approach. In relation to stop and search, they robustly defended their strategy in terms of its effectiveness in combatting knife crime (see Murray and Harkin, 2016), while the deployment of armed officers was viewed as an operational matter for the Chief Constable in the context of his professional assessment of the risk to Scotland's communities. Faced with a situation in which the credibility of the SPA was being questioned by the media and politicians, the process of commissioning research sent an important signal to external stakeholders in the wider political system, and the public that the SPA was using expert knowledge to help reduce uncertainty in an unstable environment of strongly conflicting views but also assisted in underpinning alternative policy preferences in these areas. In relation to stop and search, for example, SPA was able to use the evidence to indicate that if used appropriately, this tactic could help detect and prevent criminality, but that it is not possible to draw simply cause and effect relations between increasing stop and search and falling rates of violent crime. There are also significant risks that it could also cause 'a loss of confidence within the community which could undermine the

principle of policing by consent and damage the ability of the police to work in partnership with the community to tackle crime' (Scottish Police Authority, 2014: 4). Similarly, in relation to the decisions about the use of armed officers on routine patrol, research evidence highlighted the importance of gaining community consent for policy shifts of this kind (Scottish Police Authority, 2015). In both these areas, there have been significant policy shifts driven in part by the contributions of research: the scale of the use of stop and search has significantly declined, and the policy on armed officers has reverted to the position to prior to police reform.

The Dutch Police Act 2012 contains a legal obligation that the act should be evaluated within five years after the start of the new police system. In 2013 the Minister installed an independent Committee to carry out this evaluation. One of the first initiatives of the Committee was a 'mid-term evaluation' of one of the regional units of the National Police, the East of the Netherlands. Dutch parliament had asked for an early evaluation of this element of the National Police because it feared that the large size of this police region might cause all kinds of (extra) problems. After its publication, the report of this study (Jacobs et al., 2015) was strongly criticized because of its lack of conceptual logic and methodological quality (Fijnaut, 2015). Although the study was meant as a sort of early warning, its impact on the further implementation and structure of the Dutch reform was minimal.

Much more impact arose from another study on the local police teams of the National Police, published in 2016 (see for an English-written publication about this study: Terpstra, 2021). This study was commissioned by the then-independent Dutch Police & Science Foundation. It showed that there were serious problems and shortcomings in the National Police at the local level and that many of its high ambitions were not realized. In addition, the study also showed that the nationalization of the Dutch police had a negative impact on the room for local policing. Many of the local police officers, both in supervisory positions and the rank-and-file officers, felt alienated from their own organization and frustrated because of the 2013 police reform. At first, the report of this study met very contradictory reactions. Many of the local officers said that they were very glad with this report because it was felt to be a recognition of the problems that the 2013 police reform had created for them and that was often denied until then. At the same time, the report also generated a lot of resistance, and it was even suggested by some that the report should not be published.

Although it took some time before the report was made public when it was published, the political and organizational context of the study changed radically. In 2015 the Minister who had introduced the National Police, had to resign after a conflict with parliament. In early 2016 the first chief constable of the Dutch National Police, who in many respects had become the personification of the National Police, also had to resign because of the many problems in the implementation of the new national police system. With the new Chief Constable, a turn in the reform policy was created, with much more emphasis on the importance of local elements and with less stress on

unrealistic time schedules in the implementation process, or as it was called 'too much at the same time' (Terpstra, 2021). It was especially a change in the organizational and political climate that made the reception of the research report about local police teams radically different. Instead of resistance, the report was now increasingly perceived as a supporting argument in the implementation policy of the National Police in the Netherlands since that time. What was also important was that the central findings of this study were confirmed in several studies by the Dutch Inspectorate about the implementation of the 2013 police reform (Inspectie, 2017).

Evaluating the Strategic Outcomes of Reform

The final type of research examined here is the evaluation of the strategic outcomes of the two police reforms. As mentioned before, in the Netherlands, this evaluation was conducted by an independent Committee, following a legal obligation laid down in the Dutch Police Act 2012. The Scottish Police and Fire Reform Act 2012 did not include a comparable legal obligation. It was only after the new force had been established for two years that the Scottish government decided to commission an evaluation of the reform, which was conducted by a consortium of three independent research organizations led by SIPR. The four-year evaluation began in 2015, and resulted in several reports (SIPR et al. 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019).

In the Netherlands, in November 2017, the Evaluation Committee published its final report. This was based on five different studies. These studies were about the legal position of the National Police, the business operational aspects of the police force, the governance, accountability and local position of the police, the performance of the police, and finally, an overview of relevant developments in the Dutch police system since the late 1980s, also including an overview of all relevant studies conducted in this field. These five studies were conducted by different groups of researchers, from universities, research institutes and consultancy firms. In its final report, the Committee concluded that the complexity of the implementation of the Police Act 2012 had been seriously underestimated by the government. The reform was said to have been too ambitious, with too much emphasis on centralization and top-down measures. The relations between the Minister and the Chief Constable were found to be lacking in transparency, and it was recommended that there should be more discretion for the Chief Constable. On the other hand, the Minister had multiple and even contradictory roles in the relationship with the police. The Committee made 12 different recommendations. The Chief Constable should have more discretion for his own policy and managerial measures. The national consultative body between the mayors and the Minister should have an independent chairman. There should also be a more effective organization for the supervision of the National Police.

According to the Committee, it was not possible to present a final evaluation of the Dutch police reform. The data necessary for such an evaluation, they contended, were not available, and more time was needed to realize the ambitions of the Police Act 2012. For that reason, the Committee asked for a new evaluation of the National Police after another five years (starting in 2022). Nevertheless, the Committee concluded that the Police Act 2012 should be continued and viewed it as an adequate legal framework for further development of the police system. However, the Committee's work was strongly criticized. It was called an illusion that with five more years to go, the exact measurement of key indicators and causal analysis of the impact of the reform process would become possible. Furthermore, several of the main conclusions of the Committee were not based on their empirical studies, and it looked as if these had a more political nature, raising doubts about the true independence of the Committee.

By comparison, the evaluation of the strategic outcomes of Scottish police reform has perhaps been less ambitious, but also more practical. SIPR established a programme of research in order to track the impact and implications of police reform. This included a collaborative PhD studentship with Police Scotland on the effects of reform on local policing; a longitudinal social attitudes survey tracking public awareness of police reform and its impact on public confidence; and international comparative research comparing and contrasting the reform journey in Scotland with that in the Netherlands (Terpstra and Fyfe, 2014; 2015; 2019; Terpstra, Fyfe & Salet, 2019). In addition, the Scottish Government commissioned an independent evaluation of police reform, conducted by a consortium led by SIPR. The evaluation was framed by the Government as an assessment of progress towards achieving its three strategic objectives for reform in terms of reduced duplication of back-office services, improved access to national capacity and specialist expertise, and strengthened connections with communities. The evaluation was seen by the Government as an opportunity to provide some objective evidence with respect to achieving each of these aims and to help Police Scotland deliver these goals. Based on interviews with a range of national key informants in Police Scotland, the Scottish Government, SPA and other criminal justice agencies, as well as a series of geographical case studies involving local policing teams, local politicians, community groups and the public, the evaluation produced four major reports (SIPR et al, 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019). These reports made clear, however, that it was not possible to reach any definitive conclusions as to whether the aims of reform have been achieved. In relation to reducing duplication, for example, there is evidence of significant progress being made towards rationalizing service provisions, but this is having some negative impacts on the resourcing of local policing teams. In terms of accessing specialist support and national capacity, there is some evidence of improvements in this area but also a perception among local officers that the process had become more bureaucratic than before the reform. In relation to the aims of strengthening connections with communities, there was some positive views expressed by community

organizations and the public but also an awareness that community-oriented approaches are under pressure from other demands on policing. More generally, the research highlighted some key challenges encountered during reform (SIPR et al., 2019). These included the tensions between centralism and localism; how the cumulative consequences of decisions taken at a national level to restructure policing resulted in unintended consequences locally in terms of reductions in resources; and how insufficient attention had been given to the cultural aspects of reform, allowing a dominant approach to policing centred around enforcement and performance management to emerge at the cost of a focus on community well-being, collaboration, harm reduction and local engagement.

Conclusion: The Impact of Researching Police Reform

Drawing on his own experience of being involved in researching police reforms in the Nordic countries, Holmberg has posed the question as to whether evaluations of reform have any utility or are ultimately futile exercises (Holmberg, 2021). His own experience is that evaluations are typically difficult to conduct in a manner that yields clear results, and that those results appear to have limited impact. The challenges of undertaking research on macro-scale reforms whose goals are often vague and that are taking place at a national scale mean that scientific rigour is difficult. But it is the politics of reform that often lead to research findings having limited impact. Negative results tend to reflect badly on the police managers charged with implementing the reforms rather than on those who drew up the original plans, so results may be ignored, while the political drive for police reform means that any negative effects tend to be downplayed. However, Holmberg concludes that while the 'science of police reform may not be the most exact of sciences, it is far preferable to no science at all'.

In Scotland and the Netherlands, the evaluation of reform has played an important role in terms of informing policy preferences in relation to the next stages of reform. This is most clearly evident in relation to the debate about localism and the consequences of centralized, national police structures for local policing and for relationships with local communities and local government. While supporters of reform have consistently claimed that a national police force can enhance local policing (by, for example, improving local access to specialist expertise and resources), critics have highlighted the risk of negative impacts such as the erosion of local democratic oversight and a loss of local knowledge among officers. Against this background, the evaluation of police reform in both Scotland and the Netherlands has been able to highlight the negative but often unintended consequences of these centralizing tendencies. In both countries, the research related to reform has indicated the emergence of an 'abstract police' in which the police operate more at a distance, are more impersonal and formal, less direct and more decontextualized (Terpstra, Fyfe, and Salet, 2019; see too Terpstra, Salet and Fyfe, 2022).

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