INTERACT

The INTERACT (Investigating New Types of Engagement, Response and Contact Technologies in Policing) project explored the use of new technologies in interactions between the police and public, and how police can build legitimacy with various publics amidst changes to police contact.

BRIEFING 7 - **March 2025**

INTERACT PROJECT FINDINGS SUMMARY

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Key Points:

1. Assumptions are often made about the wants and needs of the public in relation to technology in policing. Before implementing a new method or tool, more consideration should be given to the existing evidence base and to consultation and engagement with diverse publics.
2. It is important to provide services and experiences that meet accessibility needs throughout the process. Technology is not a silver bullet but should be considered as one tool amongst a suite of broader accessibility processes in policing.
3. Public needs and preferences vary. When it comes to contacting the police, sufficient 'channel choice' is crucial, including traditional (e.g. front desk and 999) as well as digital options (e.g. online reporting and live chats).
4. Contacting the police (e.g. to report a crime) needs to be understood as one part of a larger process, rather than as separate from the rest of a journey to justice.
5. Technology is not neutral in policing encounters, and it is important to consider trust in technology, separate to and in combination with trust in the police. Police should be more transparent in where, how and why they are using technologies to interact with the public and should engage with the public at all stages of development, implementation and continued use (e.g. explaining why BWV is or is not being turned on and where possible allowing members of the public to have a say in whether it is activated or not).
6. Who (or what) people interact with when they contact the police is important. Police work is inherently relational, and it is crucial not to design humans out of policing processes. For example, human-in-the-loop decision-making is vital for the maintenance of public trust.
7. People need to believe that their reason for contacting the police has been recognised by someone. This may mean a response and subsequent updates but must, at a minimum, involve an acknowledgement of their issue.

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Background

Social changes and technological advancements have brought shifts in the delivery of services to the public. Over recent years, new contact channels have been introduced which increase the options available to the public to report incidents to the police (see Briefings 1-2). These include online reporting forms, Live Chat, and reporting via social media. This represents a 'channel shift' from the past when interactions with the police required phone calls, visits to police stations, or encounters in public places. Police hope that moving online will improve efficiency, ease of use, and perhaps enhance service quality and public trust. However, the potential effect of these changes on public confidence has not been fully explored.

Levels of trust and confidence in the police in the UK have been declining and are lower in areas of deprivation and among minoritised groups. The public expect local policing to prioritise community safety and be present, visible, accessible and engaging to build relationships and trust. Public consultation and engagement around the introduction of new technologies is central to transparency, and thus to public confidence, so it is important to explore perspectives on digital police contact (see Briefing 3).

Some of these interactions already involve chatbots driven by Artificial Intelligence (AI), and the use of AI in these scenarios is likely to increase in the future. However, many people experience 'algorithmic aversion' when dealing with machines (see Briefing 2). People may distrust, fear, or feel uncomfortable relying on algorithms in certain contexts. We also know that people pay close attention to the quality of interactions with authority figures such as police officers, particularly across dimensions of respect, neutrality, transparency and 'voice' - that is procedural justice. The extent to which police can deliver procedural justice via machine-based interactions is unclear.

In addition to pursuing policing mediated by technology and the incorporation of procedural justice theory, police in the UK have also begun to consider the accessibility of policing – often assuming that technology will increase accessibility. For example, autistic people encounter the police for a wide variety of reasons: as victims, suspected offenders, as witnesses, and by requesting assistance. There is a growing body of scholarship that explores the conflict that can arise because of differences in communication between autistic individuals and police officers (see Briefing 4). However, little research has explored the communication preferences of autistic individuals in the context of policing.

Moreover, procedural justice theory has typically assumed that 'contact' takes place between police and members of the public in a shared physical space, but for the British Sign Language (BSL) using deaf community, contact with police often requires the presence and use of technology, usually via a BSL interpreter on a technologically-enabled video relay service (see Briefing 5). Deaf BSL users are often not included in designing initiatives to address their accessibility needs so it is important to conduct research on their experiences of technology in policing.

In terms of in-person policing, this, too, has become a site where new technologies are being introduced. For example, body-worn video (BWV) has become a standard feature of police kit due to a range of motivations (see Briefing 6). This can include protection for officers and the public as well as being an evidence-gathering tool. However, there is little research which employs qualitative observational methods to observe police/public encounters and explore how BWV is actually used and its effects in these encounters. While it is assumed that BWV will bring certain benefits, there is little conclusive evidence on whether these are achieved and in what way. Other technologies are also employed in in-person encounters, such as mobile data terminals (MDTs) and automatic number plate recognition systems (ANPR). Qualitative research is needed to better understand how these systems are experienced in combination and the effect of this on public confidence.

What we did

Police perceptions: Seven UK strategic level interviews, 45 force level strategic and operational interviews, 61 hours of observations of call-centres and digi-101 and 23 hours of observations of digital-journey workshops.

Public Perceptions: Four focus groups and four interviews with a total of 29 members of the public in England and Scotland. 500 hours of observation of in-person public encounters with police in rural and urban sites across four case study areas. Two focus groups with deaf BSL users, (one in England and one in Scotland). Semi-structured interviews or small focus groups with nine autistic individuals.

Public online surveys: Three online studies with members of the public across the UK (640 participants in study 1, 648 in study 2, and 1,100 in study 3).

See briefing papers 1-6 for more details of our research methods.

Key findings

1. Public Consultation and Engagement

Through our strategic interviews, we found that policing leaders hold certain assumptions about what benefits new contact channels will bring, and who they will benefit, within a broader narrative that technology will help with managing demand (see Briefing 1 for more detail) but also reach new populations. Our police participants tended to believe that the public wanted to engage in transactions with a police force, and to share or obtain information as quickly and easily as possible. This aligned with a belief that the public increasingly wanted to use technologically-mediated forms of contact with a 'self-service' element. These were expected to appeal to younger people, and to assist with various access needs. Digital contact was therefore seen as a solution to managing existing demand, and a way of increasing demand by reaching new populations.

With a few exceptions, we found relatively little evidence of engagement with the public as end-users of the contact products that were being designed. Instead, it was the police, not the public, that were viewed as the end users. This meant that technology options were often designed based on assumptions, and police's own experiences and preferences. There were therefore some misunderstandings about particular groups' access needs.

Assumptions were being made about the wants and needs of the public in relation to technology in policing. More consideration should be given to the existing evidence base as well as consulting and engaging with diverse publics. This could help police avoid making incorrect assumptions about what digital contact can deliver for policing and the public, and help design new forms of contact that take account of a diverse range of needs.

2. Accessibility needs: technology is not a silver-bullet

Our strategic-level participants generally saw technology as offering a range of benefits to members of the public with diverse needs.

For the autistic individuals we spoke to (see Briefing 4) the option to choose how to contact police across different reporting platforms was seen as beneficial to ensuring comfort and autonomy. Online reporting could reduce anxiety by enabling increased anonymity and asynchronous reporting so an individual can take time to reflect on their feelings and accurately convey their experiences without the pressure of an in-person or verbal encounter. However, some participants felt pressured by forms requiring them to select from pre-defined answers rather than allowing free text, underscoring the importance of choice of contact medium.

During in-person encounters with the police the use of BWV can contribute to loss of confidence in the police if technology is not explained. This was particularly the case for black autistic participants. Also, the dependence on written forms of digital contact is not always suitable for individuals with sensory processing differences. When materials such as statements are not produced in formats accessible to the individual, they may not understand the process used. Alternatives should be provided in consultation with affected communities. What is important is that people's needs are met regardless of the medium of the encounter. Participants spoke of the need for enhanced training and understanding of autism (and neurodivergence more broadly) within policing.

Trust in the police to address the access needs of deaf BSL users (see Briefing 5) was low amongst our deaf participants. Although video relay technology was viewed as a valuable tool for gaining initial access to police services, the reality is that once the police arrive at the scene that mode of communication is cut off. Also, even when police webpages provide information that is accessible to deaf BSL users this is usually 'one way' (not interactive or providing an ability to respond) or relies on the ability of the individual to respond using written English.

Deaf BSL users evaluated trust in police based not just on how officers behaved, but also on the basis of the technology used and provision of translation services. If the technology employed is not adequate, this communicates to deaf individuals that their needs have not been fully taken into account, damaging trust and confidence in the police. Police services need to consider how best to work with deaf individuals to make sure their needs are designed into new technologies for communication.

It is important to provide services that meet accessibility needs throughout the process, for example language concordat services for deaf BSL users, and ideally to provide cultural linguistic representation in the police. Technology ought not to be considered as a silver bullet that remedies all accessibility needs. Rather technology ought to be considered as one tool amongst a suite of broader accessibility processes in policing.

3. Sufficient channel choice

We concluded that the shift towards technologically-mediated forms of contact (often text-based data entry) has altered the nature of interactions between a member of the public and the police. New forms of digital contact can make members of the public more responsible for reporting in the 'right' ways and for communicating the 'right' information' about their concern to the police to access police resources. For example, a member of the public reporting a crime online will be filling in a form that has been designed to meet police needs. There can be little space for voice, i.e. for them to share information as they wish. These developments are at odds with research that tells us the public value the relational aspects of encounters with police. It also assumes members of the public are equally capable of describing their needs in ways that will trigger a policing response. This is unlikely to be the case, and if the public are increasingly pushed towards contacting the police in digitally-mediated ways this may worsen inequalities in terms of access to policing services.

When people talk about visible and reassuring policing, they tend to mean 'real life' in-person policing. Digital presence, such as social media posts, did not inspire the same confidence or feelings of safety among members of the public in our focus groups, who had noticed a decrease in physical police presence. Digital contact may be seen as an alternative to long call wait times, but participants emphasised the importance of clear guidance (e.g. if certain channels should be used for certain crime types and providing information about the anticipated timeframe for a response). People did have concerns about digital exclusion (for more detail see Briefing 3), with some favouring speaking to a person and underlining the importance of choice about how to interact. Also, two-way communication was seen as important to enhancing confidence, including by engaging with communities in-person to build familiarity and relationships over the longer term.

In sum, new forms of digital contact are shifting the burden of responsibility onto the public. New systems should be tested with various publics with different needs and abilities. Digital visibility should not be expected to replace in-person police presence and engagement. The needs and preferences of the public vary, so when it comes to contacting the police sufficient channel choice is crucial, including via traditional as well as digital options.

4. Contact as part of a process

We identified a tendency for police to commission and deliver contact projects that concentrated on 'moments' of contact. This sometimes means that the public's end-to-end policing experience is not considered or evaluated (see Briefing 1). Projects delivering new forms of contact tended to view contact as a product, which ended once the member of the public had submitted their information, or a 'job' had been passed on to another police business area. Success is often measured in this self-contained context, for example via user satisfaction at the end of a reporting encounter, rather than when the member of the public thought the issue had been resolved. Collecting data prematurely is likely to give a false measure of public satisfaction with police service delivery.

Contacting the police (e.g. to report a crime) needs to be understood as one part of a larger process, rather than as separate from the rest of someone's justice journey. The public's end-to-end policing and justice experience should be considered and evaluated.

5. Technology is not neutral and trust in technology impacts confidence in policing

Most officers we spoke to tended to focus on how BWV can be a powerful tool of protection for the police, rather than considering how BWV could protect the public (see Briefing 6). The officers we observed indicated that BWV can be effective in changing the behaviour of a member of the public (e.g. reducing aggression) but we witnessed occasions where activation of the camera could aggravate a member of the public. Even where Standard Operating Procedures require (wherever possible) officers to announce when they activate cameras, we found that officers often did not do this as they forgot or thought it was obvious that the camera was on.

BWV is controlled by police officers, but members of the public sometimes asked for cameras to be turned on or off (for example in an upsetting or personal situation). They were aware of being recorded and wanted to control this to some degree and would sometimes create their own recordings, using mobile phones, to rebalance power and exert some control.

We also observed how police systems like Automatic Number Plate Recognition are used and found that although they can provide quick and easy access to important information, if databases were inaccurate this led to negative encounters with the public. The use of mobile data terminals to take notes during an encounter could distract an officer from the interaction, reduce eye contact and make it appear that they were not listening.

Technology is not neutral in policing encounters, and it is important to consider trust in technology, separate to and in combination with trust in police. Steps should be taken to increase transparency in police use of technology and let members of the public have more of a say where possible.

6. Humans are important as policing is relational

Our online studies with members of the public show that people prefer human operators over chatbots in Live Chat online crime reporting scenarios (see Briefing 2). We found that overall satisfaction with how the police handled the case was higher with human operators, irrespective of the outcome. The preference for human police operators seems to be driven by concerns about trustworthiness and the need for human involvement in sensitive situations.

While procedural justice is valued in all interactions with police, including with chatbots, people find it easier to 'see' procedural justice in human behaviour and its impact is greater in human interactions. There is a need to balance human and AI interactions to enhance perceived fairness and effectiveness of these systems.

Who (or what) people interact with when they contact the police is important. There is a preference for humans, rooted in notions of trust and sensitivity. There is a human and relational value in procedural justice, and over-reliance on machines that replace human involvement could undermine trust and erode public confidence in policing. It is crucial not to design humans out of policing processes. For example, human-in-the-loop decision-making is vital for the maintenance of public trust, and systems need to be designed in ways that make it clear to people that a human is involved in dealing with 'their' crime or problem.

7. Recognition and authenticity as central to procedural justice

Recognition is central to procedural justice (how fairly people feel they are treated by police) alongside respect, neutrality and trustworthy motives. When information is provided by the public it is important for police to acknowledge this and provide a response and updates. Authenticity underpins procedural justice, for example when demonstrating politeness and respect. Both may be considered fundamentally human traits or behaviours – certainly, many of our participants struggled to see machine-based policing as authentic or capable of recognising them as worthy of respect.

Our public focus groups (see Briefing 3) show that two-way communication is required to enhance confidence, for example through keeping those contacting the police updated, including via digital means (e.g. text-based alerts). At a minimum, it is important to acknowledge receipt of communication and keep people updated about what is happening and the outcome.

Whilst procedurally just experiences have been assumed to require opportunities for 'voice' (where members of the public can express their views), the increasing reliance on technology - as an intermediary between the member of the public and a representative of the police – demonstrates the importance of being heard not just expressing a viewpoint or sharing information.

People need to believe that their reason for contacting the police has been recognised by a person. This may mean a response and updates but must, at a minimum, involve an acknowledgement of their issue.

Recommendations

1. Instead of making assumptions about the needs of the public in relation to technology in policing, consideration should be given to the existing evidence base, undertaking public consultation, and engaging those with lived experience.
2. Services must meet accessibility needs throughout the process (e.g. language concordat services for deaf BSL users) and awareness of accessibility needs (e.g. neurodiversity) should be enhanced via training and consultation. Technology should be considered as one tool amongst a suite of accessibility processes in policing.
3. Given diverse needs, when contacting the police it is crucial to have sufficient channel choice, including traditional as well as digital options. Consideration should be given to when and where it is appropriate to prioritise in-person police presence and having discussions with the public about realistic expectations.
4. Contacting the police should be understood as only one part of a larger process and the public's end-to-end justice experience should be considered and evaluated.
5. Trust in technology is important for confidence in policing, so steps should be taken to increase transparency in police use of technology, to explain its use and to allow members of the public to have more of a say where possible (e.g. requesting Body-Worn Video to be turned on or off).
6. Policing is inherently relational, so it is important not to design humans out of processes. Anyone reporting a crime should have a clearly identified option to speak to a human and it is crucial to make clear that humans (not Artificial Intelligence) are responsible for decision making in policing.
7. Two-way communications are beneficial and procedural justice should be demonstrated. But beyond simply providing opportunities to 'voice', recognition is important for people to feel their issue has been received and acknowledged by a person, ideally via a response and updates on their case.

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