

**Detectives or Clerks?  
An Examination of the Work of Detectives**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper reports findings from a participant observation study of detective work in a UK constabulary. It seeks to update contemporary understanding and suggests that the time given to investigative activities has decreased. Further, organisational and intra-organisational pressures to complete clerical tasks, especially crime related tasks, have reduced the opportunity for detectives to engage in proactive, crime prevention and detection activities. Some suggestions are made about the future of the Criminal Investigations Department, the use of civilian support staff and the function of detectives.*

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# **DETECTIVES OR CLERKS?**

## *an examination of the work of detectives*

*dedicated to all the hardworking detectives of Northville*

### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper reports findings from a participant observation study of detective work in a UK constabulary. It seeks to update contemporary understanding and suggests that the time given to investigative activities has decreased. Further, organisational and intra-organisational pressures to complete clerical tasks, especially crime related tasks, have reduced the opportunity for detectives to engage in proactive, crime prevention and detection activities. Some suggestions are made about the future of the Criminal Investigations Department, the use of civilian support staff and the function of detectives.*

### **1.1 Introduction**

In public myth - exemplified in the ever popular TV serials like Colombo, Kojac, and Miami Vice - detectives spend most of their time chasing and catching criminals. Their skill consists of unravelling plots, collecting and evaluating evidence, and, in Sherlock Holmes fashion, being able to uncover the evil genius that lies behind criminal endeavour. Doubtless, there is considerable dramatic license in such things as television shows, but nonetheless, the idea that detectives spend a large part of their time on crime fighting activity has been shown to be wrong and, moreover, when they do get involved with investigative policing, their efforts are not always cost-effective in terms of arrests and successful convictions. This is not to say that detectives are lazy or incompetent (the pressures of work are unlikely to allow for passengers) but because their actual function is, increasingly, a bureaucratic one: they have to create and store records and files, and must prepare documents for presentation to the courts. Their involvement with arrests is typically *post hoc*, and they have little opportunity for investigative policing (though it may still be worthwhile).

Of course, the work of the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) will, naturally, change over time. Alterations in the amount of crime that occurs and is reported will affect workloads;

technological and material support, and more, will affect how the work is done (Weatheritt, 1986). In this paper we assess how these and other changes have affected the work of the CID towards the end of the 1980's on the basis of ethnographic and quantitative measures of CID work. Our main observations will be that detective work is an eclectic assemblage of little tasks, a mosaic made up of telephone, administrative and clerical report writing. Further, the need to complete crime reports and the associated production of crime records, within time limits, drives all else. This results in far less time being given to investigative work than had previously been the case. "Detecting", and all that word ordinarily conveys - pursuing inquiries, building up contacts - is only ever done once clerical work is finished.

It seems to us that the findings we will present here do not simply bring scholarly understanding up to date, but that the burden of clerical duties in the CID is such that a threshold has or is about to be broken. The function, purpose, and future of the CID is now in question. The structure of police organisations with all the informal hierarchies of status that goes with it, manifested in privileges like the right to civilian clothes, "black" overtime and the rest, may have become outmoded; designers of information technology may need to bear in mind that system enhancements should not necessarily focus on the support of the crime fighting function but perhaps more on the clerical (1). Indeed, in being largely administrative, a good proportion of CID work may now be suitable for civilian operatives.

These are but a handful of the issues that need to be thought through; there are many more. The extent and the contentiousness of the issues in question are such that clearly we could not address them all. What we do offer is a description of the circumstances that detectives currently operate in. We recognise that there is no simple answer to the question of "where now?" but offer suggestions about the future and hope to stimulate more research on an area that has often been neglected.

## **1.2 Previous studies (2)**

Detectives are a relatively neglected area of inquiry. Patrol and Uniform work, by contrast, has been subject to much more analysis (3). A number of issues have been highlighted by this, albeit small, literature. One of the first extensive studies was

view detectives as working in an environment consisting of four intersecting components: the community, the network of criminal control, the police force, and the occupational culture of fellow detectives. Detectives are both products and producers of this environment, creating or *instantiating* the rules and its formal features as well as obeying them. They are able to manipulate routine and accepted ways of behaving, to control information and the people they deal with. In other words, the organisational context of detective work is one that specifically allows for autonomy and freedom of action. (Though, of course, Ericson's study was conducted in a Canadian setting where there was no equivalent to P.A.C.E. (4)

This freedom is restrained by the need to maintain good "clear up" or detection rates, the measure of detective work, but allows them to use 'creative' techniques to ensure that these rates are good (5).

Paradoxically, though crime and detection rates are the measure of detective efficiency, it is not the CID who make most of the arrests nor is it the case that detective work is particularly productive when measured on these criteria. In the US, a study by the Rand corporation found that

- (a) criminal investigation is an inherently low yield undertaking
  - (b) criminal investigation is performed inefficiently.
- (Greenwood, *et al* 1977)

For example, 30% of all arrests for crime were as a result of uniformed officers responding to a call from the scene of a crime. In approximately 50% of arrests the identity of the offender was known to the victim or a witness. This left some 20% where an investigative effort was called for. Of this, in only approximately 3% of cases did the arrest result from a 'special investigative effort' where organisation, training or skill made any difference. Put the other way, detectives were spending 93% of their time on activities that did not lead directly to the solving of previously reported crimes. Somewhere around 97% of cleared crimes would be resolved no matter what the investigators did, as long as the obvious, routine steps were taken. Only in the major cases such as murder, robbery and commercial theft did they find any evidence that the *quality* of the investigative effort could affect the clearance rate to any extent. The role of the detective was seen to be a support function for the prosecution service, gathering

potential for successful prosecution.

This *post hoc* role for detectives is not without skill or importance. Bottomley and Coleman (1981), studying a constabulary in the north of England, found that of those offences solved by police action, (which was only 14.28% of the total), 54% were discovered during an interview by the CID. These usually formed the basis of offences “taken into consideration” (TICs) at court. (Note that their study occurred prior to the introduction of the P.A.C.E) Bottomley and Coleman concluded that a detective's skill lay less in his ability to investigate in a proactive manner, than to interview and obtain admissions and thereby TICs, after the offender had been taken into custody by a variety of means other than those connected with proactive detective work. They claimed that detectives regularly used a range of investigative techniques, yet achieved results that were not compatible to the effort expended.

Moving on to the organisation of detective work itself, Burrows and Tarling (1982, also 1987) conducted an activity analysis in four provincial British police forces. Using self completing activity logs to gather information, they note that detectives spend an average of 40% of their time doing investigative work including interviewing. Report writing occupied on average 27% of detective time. Travelling to and from enquiries accounted for 10%. The remainder was consumed by court, refreshment breaks, patrol work and other duties.

Lastly, Sanders (1977) argues that these various aspects are fitted together in a mosaic of little tasks. Moreover, there are so many of these tasks, one following the other, that detective work has a production-line quality (Sanders, 1977: 128). The character of their work, Sanders suggests, is at odds with the detective's self conception. They tend to see themselves as adventurous, heroic, individualistic and independent (rather like characters in the television programs mentioned earlier). He offers the epithet ‘romantic bureaucrat’ to describe them.

Here, of course, he is alluding to ‘working culture’. The CID, like all working groups, creates a self identity that serves to cohere its constituent members into a community, provides a rationale for motivation at work, measures of skill and status, and more. That this conception does not fit the facts as we, outsiders, see it, must not allow us to misunderstand the importance these self conceptions have. Without them detectives may not be motivated

recruiting, there may even be a weakening of the status of detectives vis a vis criminals. After all, what would concern a guilty offender more: being interviewed by a clerk, or by a detective who has the powers and skills of those represented on the TV?

There are then several important issues brought to light by previous studies. Detectives are given considerable organisational autonomy. Though they have certain goals to achieve, they are allowed to manage their own affairs to achieve those goals as they see fit; the resulting working practices have the character of a 'mosaic'. Detection or clear-up rates, though the primary measure of what detectives do, are largely misleading since the role of detectives in arrest and conviction is largely *post hoc*. Finally, about 40% of their time is spent on what may be loosely described as investigative activities and about 27% on report writing.

To address these concerns, the findings will be presented in three broad sections. The first, on the basis of quantitative measures, outlines general categories of work tasks. We will note that less time is now given to investigative activities than had previously been recorded; and that a larger part of this occurs inside the police station, rather than outside. Second, we will examine arrests, and the role of investigative work in them. Third, we will look at "a day in the life" of a detective. This will flesh out those categories of activity quantitatively specified and enable us to illustrate what organisational autonomy means. We suggest that because the work of detectives is so broken up, and has the consistency of a mosaic, their ability to engage in investigative policing, and more generally, crime prevention, is minimised.

### **1.3 Research site, methods**

The force studied is divided into six divisions. On the coast a busy seaside town provides cosmopolitan policing difficulties for the first; the second and third are predominantly rural; to the south overspill estates from nearby metropolitan areas provide different policing problems for the fourth. Finally two divisions, in the centre of the county, are based in towns that are now struggling to come to terms with changing social and economic conditions. One of these divisions was chosen as the research site, partly because of practical reasons - the field worker was familiar with it, etc, - but also because it reflected many of the economic and practical policing problems common throughout the

'Northville'.

A mix of participant observation and quantitative methods were used. In four months' observation of Northville during 1988, the field worker accompanied 17 detectives on 60 tours of duty to an accumulated total of 523.70 hours. The average length of a tour of duty was 8.72 hours, including all refreshment periods. The normal tour of duty for a police officer is 8 hours, including refreshments. The longest period observed in a single day was 13 hours from 8 am to 9 pm. On only two occasions was a detective observed to finish his tour of duty before the allotted 8 hours by taking off 'black time', i.e., previously accumulated overtime that had not been accepted for payment.

The observations of the use of time were recorded contemporaneously and transferred each day on to an activity log sheet. At the end of the study the material on these (60) sheets was transferred to a master sheet. The time spent on each activity was then expressed as a percentage of the total.

Every aspect of detective work was logged for the study from idle chat to the filling in of overtime sheets. Although laborious, it was our intention to accurately capture activities, whatever they might be. Techniques deployed in previous studies, such as the use of self recording logs, may have resulted in some elements of work being lost. This is not because, say, detectives are (perhaps willfully) unable to keep logs, as that some activities may seem too small to include or are soon and easily forgotten about. For instance, a detective may remember that he or she has made several phone calls, but is less likely to recall how many; a proper recording may lead to unexpected discoveries. Our study shows, for example, that over 6.73% of detectives time is spent on telephone work (in one case, a detective was observed to make 29 calls in one day!) - more time than is given, by way of dramatic contrast, to external proactive detective work.

## **2.1 Results**

In this section the total time given to all observed task of detectives from Northville are described. Two prefatory remarks are in order. First, the study was of normal routine detective work in a sub-divisional office of Northville as opposed to the quite different flow of activity that may be witnessed during a major enquiry. Second, the figures account for a mix of the activities of constables and sergeants.

## 2.2 All tasks

**Table one**

	Percentage	Time (hours)
Clerical duties (all crime matters)	16.98	08.95
Clerical duties (administrative)	02.83	04.84
Make telephone calls	05.14	26.91
Answer telephone	01.59	08.33
Typing Pool Dictation	00.65	03.30
Interviewing suspects	05.84	30.58
Interviewing witnesses/complainants	07.18	37.60
Crime conversation	05.14	26.91
Custody Office duties	03.65	09.06
Utilise Collators Office	00.86	04.50
Attend other office	01.15	06.01
Attend conferences and briefings	01.06	05.55
Attend morning parade	01.24	06.51
Advise or assist Uniform Officers	00.72	03.75
Deal with recovered property	00.42	02.48
Travel to and from enquiries	07.58	39.70
Attend Court	01.94	10.15
Enquiries at scenes of crime	01.94	00.40
Conduct house searches	01.75	09.16
Search suspect's car	00.03	00.15
Directed car patrol	00.31	00.75
Undirected car patrol	03.31	07.35
Undirected foot patrol	00.16	00.83
Abortive visits (occupant not in)	00.62	03.23
See informants	01.01	05.30
Make arrests	00.37	01.96
Observations on houses	01.17	06.15
Lunch or tea	08.21	43.03
Tea break	05.95	31.15
Non-crime conversation	02.80	14.65
Easing	05.63	29.51
Lost time	01.65	08.60
GRAND TOTALS (60 shifts)	100.00	523.70 (hours)

(the figures have been rounded for comprehensibility and thus may not total accurately)

## 2.3 Breakdown

As can be seen in table one the close observation generated considerable number of categories of work activities, and in some cases the amount of time given to a task may seem quite large. Talk, for example, once aggregated, though central to social organisation - if not its defining characteristic - has rarely been

given to it. Detectives chat either about crime matters or simply socially throughout the day, and this forms the vertebrae of their work (not including the time spent talking during rest periods).

Non-work activities, including rest and lunch break entitlements, consumed almost a quarter of detectives time. Some 24.24% was spent on lunch and tea breaks, non-crime conversation, 'easing', and lost time. When expressed this way the impression might be given that members of the CID in Northville were rather slack. This would be far from the truth. For one thing, this large amount of time is the total of many small pieces or breaks legitimately taken and only a momentary pause in work. Moreover, lunch and tea breaks, are entitlements and are typical of all work situations wherever they might be. Further, easing, the taking of a walk perhaps, the reading of paper for a few minutes allows some relief from work. It would not be unreasonable to say that without such relief the morale of the CID officers would deteriorate.

More pertinent to the issues highlighted by previous studies, though, is what the results say about the relative proportion of time given to investigative activity, as against more clerical and administrative tasks.

Recalling Sanders observation that detectives tend to view themselves as adventurous, heroic, individualistic, it is perhaps interesting to calculate how much of their time they spend doing clerical and administrative work at the desk. In this category one can put clerical duties, both crime related (16.98) and administrative (2.83%), telephone actions (6.73%), and typing pool dictation (0.65%), making a total of 27.19% of the total time.

Now contrast this with the total for all investigative activities including crime conversations (5.14%), use of collator's Office 0.86% ; conferences and briefings (1.06%); morning parade 1.24% ; interviews with suspects (5.84%) and witnesses and complainants (7.18%); enquiries at scenes of crime (1.98%); house searches(1.75% ); seeing informants (1.01%); observations of houses (1.17%) and making arrests (0.37%). These combine to make 27.60%. Moreover, of those activities that can be thought of as investigative, a larger proportion occur inside Northville police station than outside. Of the 27.60% given to investigative activities, 21.32% occurred inside Northville police station.

This means that, in Northville at the end of the 1980's, detectives

bound work (27.19%) as they do on investigative activity (27.60%). The detectives Burrows and Tarling studied only a few years before spent 40% of their time doing investigative work and only 27% on report writing activities.

This difference is quite sharp. One possible reason why less time is given to investigative work is that clerical work, though not necessarily increasing as a proportion of the whole, is, gradually taking precedence over investigative (6).

Clerical crime matters, for instance, which Burrows and Tarling noted was a major burden for detectives, is by far the greatest single consumer of time for all activities engaged in by detectives at Northville, accounting for 16.98% of their time. Over the 60 days of observation, this averaged out at just under 100 minutes per day. For the detective sergeants who are burdened with the task of checking all crime files and crime reports both from Uniform and CID, the percentage of their time on this duty is 20.88%

These clerical crime matters encompass a tremendous range of individual activities some of which have to be given priority. 31 different tasks were observed at Northville. One feature of these tasks is checking and continually adding to crime files prior to their submission when complete to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) via a detective sergeant. Detective constables of Northville have an average of six such files on their desks at any one time. The sergeants carry less, an average of four, though they 'carry' serious crimes such as rapes to a greater extent. Thus at any one time the Northville office (in theory) is processing an average of 164 files amongst the 18 constables and the five sergeants working on the duty "scales"(7).

### **3.1 Arrests and the CID**

It may well be that the amount of time given to the files severely inhibits detectives, and that, over time, detectives are less and less able to engage in the proactive function. Although our results indicate that less time is given to investigative activity, it must not be thought that investigative activities by the CID have ever been particularly productive. We have already mentioned the Rand report of the early 70's; our results serve to confirm what they say. Specifically, that criminal investigation is an inherently low yield undertaking and that it is performed inefficiently. (Greenwood, *et al* 1977)

According to the Northville custody sheets, a total of 2,709 persons were arrested or taken into custody as a place of safety during the research period (8). From this total 1,184 persons were taken into custody for matters that would not in any normal course of events come within the ambit of CID work (9). The table below details the grounds of arrest in the remaining 1525 persons contrasting uniform and CID arrests.

### 3.2 Crime arrests: CID-Uniform

**Table two**

Offence	Uniform	CID	CID%
Murder	0000	01	100.00
Attempt murder	0000	04	100.00
Conspiracy	0000	01	100.00
Harbouring Escaptee	0000	01	100.00
Abduction	0000	01	100.00
Assault to rob	0000	01	100.00
Robbery	0011	20	064.52
Conspiracy to rob	0001	01	100.00
Threats to kill	0001	01	100.00
Handling stolen goods	0000	18	047.37
Wounding	0007	05	041.67
Indecent assault	0009	06	040.00
Damage by arson	0012	05	029.41
Rape	0003	01	025.00
Assault	0086	20	018.87
Burglary	0107	10	008.55
Stealing from vehicles	0037	03	007.50
Theft	0535	30	005.31
Unauthorized taking of vehicle	0145	02	001.35
Damage	0138	01	000.72
Going equipped to steal	0028	00	000.00
Making off without payment	0008	00	000.00
Abstracting electricity	0006	000	000.00
Firearms offences	0005	000	000.00
Pervert course of justice	0002	000	000.00
Incest	0001	000	000.00
Forgery	0001	000	000.00
Totals	1352	173	11.34%

Table two clearly shows that far less arrests were made by the CID than uniform. (It will be remembered also that very little time is given to arrests - a mere 0.37%). On the other hand, table two shows that the more serious the offence the greater the likelihood that the divisional CID would make the arrest (10).

The reason why this comparison looks so unfavourable to the CID

arrests are made by uniform officers on an 'opportunistic' basis. Arrests for unauthorised taking of motor vehicles typify this, where uniform officers on patrol duties routinely stop and check suspect cars. In contrast, detective's spend, as we have seen, most of their time in the station. It is no surprise therefore that uniform made 145 of the 147 arrests for this offence. The same could hold true for damage offences, emanating from possession of an aerosol at a football match, for instance.

What is altogether more significant however, is the break down of how arrests come about. If we look at this we will see that, by and large, detective work has very little to do with arrests; serendipity and other factors play a much more important role.

The arrests discussed above came about for a variety of reasons.

- from information from Uniform
- from information received (informants)
- from information received (from observations)
- fingerprint identification
- offender named by complainant
- arrests for other force - identity known
- arrests for Crown Prosecution Service (CPS)
- follow-up inquiry- identity known
- examination of ex-members of staff - identity known
- suspects amongst staff

In only one instance was an arrest witnessed in which an investigative process was used to trace and eliminate a suspect whose identity was not immediately apparent or easily identified. In this case, a personal description was provided by the complainant which was circulated to the press. Subsequent calls from the public led to identification of a suspect who was interviewed.

Apart from this instance, the process of deductive reasoning was, in the main part, absent and not observed; on no occasion were suspects eliminated from enquiries or in the pursuance of investigative strategies over a period of hours, days and weeks, as in the popular image.

This is not to say that the CID did not do their job. Initial visits by detectives to scenes of crime were made; but these were not evidence-gathering exercises. Doubtless, if 'clues' had been readily to hand then they would have been acted upon, but, in

the case of burglaries for example, usually something had been stolen by means of forced entry at a time when few people would be in a position to either witness it or hear anything suspicious. Thus the detectives were heavily reliant on forensic evidence, most notably fingerprints and to a far lesser extent footprints. Unfortunately in all cases observed during the study, the perpetrators avoided leaving or wearing anything that could incriminate them. (Of course arrests were made for burglary but for other reasons) (11).

Because there was very little likelihood that any evidence would be at hand at a scene of a crime, detectives knew almost before they arrived that the visits would amount, in most cases, to little more than an exercise in mollifying the complainant. Assurances would be offered by the detective, ("We'll see what we can do, leave it with us"), and in addition, the requisite details for the crime report would be collected. Follow-up enquiries would be a waste of time unless either an offender came into custody by other means or there was corroborative evidence, say fingerprints.

However, we do not want to suggest that detectives never got involved with proactive policy. For example, house and car searches did sometimes generate incriminating evidence. During the study searches were witnessed on 19 occasions. In 15 of them (78%) no incriminating evidence was found to link the suspect or the offender with the alleged or suspected offence. In two cases stolen property was recovered, in one case property that was believed to be stolen was recovered and in the final case firearms were recovered. In these cases, the information gathered did not lead to new arrests, but either helped substantiate cases or was filed, left until - hopefully - it came to be useful in the future.

This study therefore shows that most arrests are made by uniform, very few are made by the CID, and within this category even less derive from investigative effort. The CID do have an important role to play in arrests, however. For the findings show that the more serious the offence, the more likely the CID will be involved. That is to say, if the CID are involved in an arrest, this will attest to the seriousness of a case: in this sense, there is a symbolic aspect to the role of the CID - a point we shall address later on.

#### **4.1 The organisation of the work**

spent on any activity automatically meant that it was not performed very often, or conversely that an activity with a higher percentage figure was always performed more often. Moreover, listing of the amount of times spent on any activity does not indicate the priorities given to various tasks or how detectives organise their working day. It would obviously be wrong to think that detectives organise themselves so that, say, the first quarter of their day is spent on administrative and clerical duties, the last quarter on investigative. One needs to know how the various tasks detectives do are fitted together, what comes first, what comes last and so on. A catalogue of unit tasks, however well measured, is only a part of a sociological understanding, and needs supplementing by a description of the “logics-in-use” at work. One needs to know which tasks are done first or are given high priority and those which are attended to “when there’s time”. Here we are alluding to the need to view detectives as skilful managers of their tasks, as agents, so to speak, of socio-structural arrangements.

We now describe a “day in the life” of a detective at Northville, based on ethnographic observations. It is, of course, one of the difficulties of ethnographic study to provide a balance between attaining what in the jargon is called *vraisemblance* (see Atkinson, 1990) and ensuring objectivity. To be sure, the one need not exclude the other, but it is never easy to maintain a balance between the two. In this case, our purpose is not to suggest that the day described is typical in every detail, only certain features - that there are numerous tasks “on the go” at any one time, that most of the tasks consume small amounts of time and even these are broken up by a variety of intrusions - telephone calls, someone coming into the office and so on. In other words we describe a typical flow of task mosaics, and it is this flow, we suggest, that is the singular characteristic of what detectives do.

What follows is based on a close observation of a relatively young detective at Northville, working a midweek day.

### **Transcript one**

- 9.0 On duty, fill in duty diary
- 9.03 Attend regular morning parade
- 9.24 Make telephone enquiry regarding ongoing inquiries
- 9.26 Read through a crime file regarding ongoing inquiries into a fraud case
- 9.28 Go to the uniform department to discuss a case under investigation by the detective and a uniform officer
- 9.50 Tea break in canteen
- 10.10 Back in office, chat with investigator
- 10.13 Telephone a hospital about the location of the female suspect on the fraud case. The hospital knows nothing of her; she is not in their employ.
- 10.25 Read through the suspect's file
- 10.35 Make further telephone enquires regarding bank case
- 10.47 Visit communications room to make sure message has been passed on to uniform colleague
- 10.54 Telephone inquires regarding a rape case. Try to contact the doctor
- 11.03 Answer telephone for colleague, take details to pass on
- 11.05 Another officer asks the detective if he will go out and make an arrest with him. Discuss the case. It is decided not to proceed
- 11.13 More telephone enquires regarding bank fraud. Phone home
- 11.40 Finish inquiries, then answer phone to take details for other officer
- 11.45 Another telephone inquiry (details unknown)
- 11.45 A different uniform officer comes into office to discuss a case
- 11.50 Telephone inquiry regarding fraud
- 12.05 Lunch
- 12.58 Back in office, make telephone inquiry
- 1.0 Conversation with another detective regarding a rape case
- 1.08 Leave office and travel to see complainant.
- 1.16 At address. Complaint involved quality of workmanship on repairs to roof. Take details
- 1.32 Travel to next inquiry
- 2.10 Visit bank that has been fraudulently used by a suspect in an case unconnected with the one above. Take details
- 2.02. Travel to next inquiry
- 2.10 Visit house of alleged offender in the latter fraud case
- 2.13 Travel back to police station
- 2.22 Detective reads through files for the second fraud case
- 2.31 Telephone inquiry to collator of nearby police station regarding the location of suspects in another case
- 2.34 Uniform officer enters and explains that another officer has found some stolen property that probably relates to an arrest the previous week of some shoplifters. The property has not been reported to the CID (as it should have) but has been put in the lost and found book
- 2.38 Detective goes and collects the property from lost and found store and takes to the CID offices
- 2.42 Answers telephone for other officer
- 2.44 Discusses another case with fellow detective
- 2.49 Telephone inquiry
- 2.51 Read court file for shoplifters

3.11 CPS calls, discusses another case  
3.20 Go to Custody office to check details of the custody records for the two shoplifters  
3.25 Tea break  
3.42 Continue to write statement  
4.05 Go to uniform department leave note for the officer who recovered the stolen property.  
4.15 continue statement  
4.28 Answer telephone for another officer; take statement to typing pool  
4.35 Look through crime index to see if a record of a purse reported stolen last week has been entered  
4.41 Phone the PC responsible for the stolen purse report and discuss who will complete the report  
4.45 Complete crime report for PC  
5.00. off duty

Between 9 am and 5 pm the detective undertook 50 activities, though many duplicated each other. He spent 38 minutes travelling, 91 minutes taking refreshment breaks; he chatted for 28 minutes, primarily about crime matters. In short he completed what we argue is a typical working day - disjointed, unstructured and often interrupted. He had been kept fully occupied by a string of demands on his time and expertise. He had pursued inquires from his desk by phone into at least two cases; he had assisted uniform officers, and had been prepared to 'straighten out' clerical duties on their behalf. He had visited a complainant, and pursued inquires at a bank. He was doing all that the department and the service could expect.

### **4.3 Comment**

We can see then that the day's work is disjointed, a mosaic of little tasks. But the example also shows that a day's work has a guiding logic to it. Because it is disjointed does not mean it has no purpose behind it, as if detectives do whatever comes in next. Time and again the detective returned to the same thing: clerical crime matters and administrative work. The clerical crime matters included making numerous phone calls, reading files, and making notes in long hand to be typed up; the administrative work included taking phone messages, sorting out entries in the lost and found book, dealing with visitors and more.

There is then a basic set of activities that continues and is attended to when all contingencies have been dealt with. These basic activities are numerous and extensive enough for a detective to typically have something to turn to. For the detective, the in tray is always full, the phone is always about to ring.

amount of work to be attended to when there are no intrusions, means that detectives have virtually no opportunity to engage in anything remotely akin to the “detective work” as it is portrayed in the media. Though, in the day we describe, there were visits to a bank and to a house owner, in neither case was the detective able to spend much time there; he had too much else to do. In the latter case it was not entirely clear that the problem was a police matter anyway (it would have to be a criminal case rather than a civil one).

Doubtless, for major crimes when large teams of detectives work together on one case - virtually to the exclusion of other work - the activities will be more akin to the media portrayal. But these are few and far between and are not the common lot of detectives. For, by and large, the day in the life of a detective is much like the one described here: no opportunity for reflection, no time for ‘staking out the joint’, no opportunity for anything but ‘keeping afloat’.

## **5.1 Conclusion**

Detectives spend most of their time at their desks working at clerical and administrative duties. Although some of this work has to do with crime matters, very little of their time is spent doing anything that can be conceived of as “investigating” in the romantic sense portrayed in the media. Indeed, as we say, they spend more time on the phone than on external investigative detective work. Our case is not that they are unwilling or incapable of devoting more of their energies to investigative work, but that (a) their working day is broken up into little pieces by contingency: the telephone rings, someone calls into the office, a record needs correcting; (b) in any case, detectives know that few arrests derive from investigations (although convictions do). Other factors lead to the solving of crime: someone owns up, information is offered, the victim knows the assailant, for example.

So, what they do, mostly, is the *post hoc* administrative and clerical duties that follow an arrest made by the uniform department. These activities more than occupy what time they have, and do not allow them to carve up free time for their own investigative work.

The organisational freedom, which we have said is an important characteristic of the detective’s situation, does not manifest itself

expressed in the manner in which they organise their mundane tasks day by day: this task now, that one a little later and so on. An overriding concern in this organisation is to complete the crime records and files, since these are the visible products of detectives (the clear up and detection rates).

In short, based on our study it is reasonable to argue that the romantic image of the detective as an investigator is totally at odds with the present reality. What Sanders called the “production-line” of CID work consists of dealing with numerous and diverse clerical, administrative and bureaucratically routine tasks. Put bluntly, detectives hardly do any detecting at all.

## **5.2 The future**

These findings beg a number of questions about the status, role, and future of the CID. One immediate possibility that comes to mind is that an administrative support unit (possibly a mix of police and civilian) could take over some of the clerical and administrative activities. This would release the more highly paid and trained detectives from this burden, allowing them to focus more on investigation. At least one force has introduced such measures in the UK. Computer support could also be designed to reduce the same burdens: this may mean that technological development should not necessarily focus on such things as “criminal intelligence”, “crime fighting” and so on, and rather more on the routine and bureaucratic. This may be all the more urgent given that P.A.C.E. legislation now necessitates detectives transcribe interview recordings - a task hard enough in itself (as any true sociologist would know) but particularly irksome when there are other, seemingly more productive things to be done.

Nonetheless, it has to be remembered, of course, that the evidence also shows that investigative work into routine crime is not, in the main, a cost-effective exercise. A lot of time could be spent gathering sufficient information to make an arrest, time which could have been spent arresting suspects in cases where it is much easier to point the finger. So why should the CID be released from their present burden?

One reason might be that detectives no longer spend enough time doing what they perceive their ‘proper’ job to be to get any satisfaction. This may lead to disillusionment, demotivation and poor workmanship. Moreover, if it became increasingly apparent

shuffle paper, then recruitment from those departments - the typical route into the CID - may become more difficult. Although most of their time is spent doing desk work, this does not mean that the work of detectives is unskilled. There is the skill of managing one's individual affairs, for example, and this skill is unlikely to have been developed to such an extent in uniform or, say, traffic departments.

Finally, and this is probably the most significant reason, there is the image of the police as a service organisation. Over the years the police have built up a reputation for being able to help solve crime and catch offenders. Admittedly, this reputation has become a little tarnished of late, but still exists, in the popular imagination at least. Would the public be so assured if police forces admitted that there is little likelihood that they would be able to detect and solve a crime unless (a) the plaintiff's knew the offender, (b) an admission of guilt was offered and (c) that only rarely is forensic evidence available and helpful? As Manning (1977) rightfully notes, the need to reassure the public is achieved, in part, symbolically. After all, who would stem the rising tide of crime if police forces sacked all their detectives and hired, instead, clerks? And perhaps worse: what would potential criminals think? (12)

### **Footnotes**

(1) For an examination of how technology can satisfy both clerical and investigative purposes, see Harper, forthcoming.

(2) References to the literature are kept to a minimum in the paper. But see Bloch & Bell, 1975; Bloch & Weidman, 1975; Steer, 1975; Wilson, 1975; Manning, 1980; Kinsey et al 1984; Banton, 1985; Hobbs, 1989; For a full review see Thornton, G. 1989.

(3) Incidentally, some of the best ethnographies in the sociological cannon of qualitative research derive from this area.

(4) For a discussion of the impact of PACE in England and Wales see Zander, 1985; Mckenzie & Irving, 1987.

(5) It goes without saying that we do not condone or excuse these techniques. They are, justifiably, the concern of many commentators in the field. It is perhaps worth remembering though, that it was over thirty years ago that Blau examined how the use of measures in bureaucratic organisations could lead to inefficiency; the police, as a bureaucracy, are no exception.

(6) It might be that the self recording logs Burrows and Tarling used resulted in a slight distortion - or should we say emphasis?- towards investigative activity away from clerical, whereas our own methods

this possibility.

(7) This has been altered, subsequent to the research, by the introduction of administrative support units.

(8) 1,525 arrests were made for crime-related matters of the type that appear on the crime statistics. The offences as shown on the custody records did not necessarily correspond to the Home Office classifications but are as described by the custody officer who wrote it on the custody sheet. For example the word 'deception' was invariably used to describe an offence of 'other frauds'. On a number of sheets more than one offence was shown, for example theft/deception, indicating some doubt as to what charge would eventually be laid against the suspect. Because these offences are not mutually exclusive in law the decision was made to only list the first offence that was written on the sheet. Neither do the arrests indicate the subsequent disposal of the case so the following table must be seen as an indication of the 'suspects' taken into custody.

(9) Arrests made by other departments include:  
Arrests on warrant for non-payment of fines etc;  
Arrests for offences connected with drink, notably breathalysers and disorderly behaviour;  
Arrests by specialist departments eg drugs and company fraud;  
Juveniles, absconders and others taken into a place of safety.

(10) It must be remembered also that the CID only constitute a relatively small percentage of the operational establishment, which makes a direct comparison of arrests simply by numbers misleading.

(11) It is of interest to note that the reliance on fingerprint evidence is crucial. In the research force 1 in 14 visits to the scene of a crime result in positive identification, as against 1 in 23 nationally.

(12) A special thanks to Mike Chatterton, whose guidance, encouragement and enthusiasm made the task of completing this research possible.

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