

Policing Decision Making in the Uncertainties of a National Emergency – Balancing Public Interest, Hazards, Staff Wellbeing, Politics, and Finances

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Background:

By the 22nd May 2020, there were over 250,000 confirmed cases of Covid-19 in the UK, with over 36,000 deaths on conservative estimates. This was a national emergency, but with significant regional variations. The Coronavirus Act was passed in 2020 to facilitate the policing response that was based around an approach of “Engage-Explain-Encourage-Enforce”. The normal policing challenges were now dominated by issues of public health, domestic abuse, cybercrime and fraud – all of which had to be balanced with a consideration for managing workforce health and well-being; and, supporting a change to working practices (i.e. move to homeworking; increased use and deployment of technology). This was all amidst major uncertainties about how the crisis would unfold, including uncertainties about how public behaviour would evolve, consequences for the policing workforce, and the nature of operational challenges which would be faced. Unlike many previous national emergencies to which police forces needed to respond there have been no clear geographical or temporal boundaries to the crisis.

Consequently, UK policing is has been facing a range of new and emerging operational and organisational challenges as a result of Covid-19, which are expected to persist and continue to evolve in the coming months and years ahead. Covid-19 has necessitated changes across all normal methods of policing service delivery to the public.

All police forces and agencies will currently be developing a recovery strategy and planning and preparing for a recovery phase. There is already an acknowledgement that the police service and wider public sector will (later in the year) be entering into a long period of inquiry, debriefing, and lessons learned alongside recovery efforts. A key element of the recovery phase will be enabling forces, the National Police Chiefs’ Council (NPCC) and College of Policing (the College) to learn lessons from their experiences and understand which alternative approaches used during Covid-19 may remain useful for policing service delivery and what lessons about preparedness for future challenges should be learned. It is important that forces and policing more widely are well supported in this endeavour.

Decisions are having to be taken in a state of uncertainty, under time pressures, with conflicting evidence. In addition, there would have been a number of influences that would have impacted on police decision-making – political influences; media pressures; legal structures; community relations; legitimacy and public trust; and learning under pressure.

As the crisis evolved there was also much greater than normal pace of change in the policy and legal environment for policing and the need to respond to daily announcements by government (and their interpretation by the media and public) which had implications for policing.

Much academic work on decision-making has focussed on taking optimal decisions in the context of known risks. However, there is increasing interest (Alvarez, Afuah, & Gibson, 2018; Kay & King, 2020) in the distinction made many years ago by Knight (1921) between risk and uncertainty. In this view, risk concerns situations in which the set of relevant potential outcomes is known and can be assigned probabilities. Under uncertainty by contrast the space of potential outcomes is not fully known, probabilities are impossible to assign meaningfully, and events may be hard to frame and categorise. The situation facing policing seems to substantially concern taking decisions not in terms of well understood risks but in the face of substantial uncertainties in the face of a rapidly evolving situation. In such contexts, there are no meaningful foundations for making optimal decisions and anticipatory thinking is often less about planning on the basis of forecasts than expert bets on what to pay attention to, in order to make sense of an evolving situation (Klein, Snowden, & Pin, 2011). This project provides an unusual opportunity to enquire into real world decision-making in the context of radical uncertainties generated by a national (and international) crisis.

Whilst the successful applicant will co-construct the research project with involved policing organisations, at this stage potential questions may include a subset of the following:

- What major uncertainties did police leaders perceive and how did understanding of these uncertainties evolve?
- How was the transition from normal policing to policing the emergency made; and how did decision making by police leaders during Covid-19 differ from other major and critical incidents? For example, what shifts were there in the balance of internal (to individual forces) and nationally coordinated decision-making.
- How was appetite for risk and uncertainty adjusted for the scale of the challenges faced and why?
- What principles and values were most central in driving decision-making? For example, a key goal seems to have been to maintain 'policing by consent'. How was this managed and with what implications for relationships (short and longer term) with the public?
- What capabilities and resources were important in supporting adaptation?
- To what extent were the lessons learned from previous major and critical incidents considered and useful or misleading?
- What trade-offs had to be made and why? E.g. workforce safety vs public safety
- How was guidance interpreted on the front-line?
- How did governance approaches help or hinder decision making?
- What were the evidence/information needs and what evidence was prioritised when making their decisions (what was the role of Experts; Scientific/Academic Research? Modelling Data?)?

- How was the evolving complexity and dynamism of relationships with government managed and with what implications? To what extent has this had lasting impact on ways of working with government?
- How were the differences between law and government guidance navigated?
- How were the transitions from policing the emergency to policing the recovery and exit, and to capturing learning, managed, and with what implications?
- What can the police learn about decision making during this pandemic that may inform future emergency responses to national emergencies and how might the findings generate wider practical and theoretical insights for high impact decision-making in the face of uncertainty?

Project Description:

The research will be interdisciplinary in nature, potentially drawing on theories and perspectives from management and organisation studies, psychology, criminology and information/decision science. Candidates should demonstrate a capability for cross-disciplinary work but are not expected to have existing expertise in all these areas,

It is likely that a mixed methods approach will be required and could include in-depth interviews, case studies, archival data and surveys. The Open University, (through the Centre for Policing Research and Learning), has access to a number of police forces and could facilitate access to potential data sources (e.g. incident commanders, front line officers; decision-logs; critical incident de-briefings).

The successful candidate will demonstrate a good understanding of theory, policy and practice related to decision-making and have a good foundation in research methods including qualitative approaches. A good understanding of policing organisations and their work will be desirable but not essential. The final theoretical framework and study design will reflect the detailed research topic, research questions and strengths of the candidate, and be co-designed with participating policing organisations. While the timing of the PhD will mean that data collection will be primarily retrospective, there may be opportunity to draw on some data collected whilst the crisis was ongoing.

Particular requirements for this project:

Due to the sensitive nature of data collection in policing and their requirements, applications can only be accepted from people who have been resident in the UK for at least the last three years. A successful applicant will also need to pass counter-terrorism check (CTC) vetting before an offer can be confirmed.

About the Supervisors:

Professor Mark Fenton-O’Creevy has been involved in studying decision-making under uncertainty for two decades. He is a founding member of a national research network, ‘Challenging Radical Uncertainty in Science Society and the Environment’. His research blog which includes recent discussion of uncertainty in the pandemic can be found at <http://emotionalfinance.net>.”

Dr Nicky Miller - Before coming to the OU in 2019, Nicky has had an established career history in the development and application of research into practice within the policing sector largely in support of the investigative process and the embedding of an evidence-based approach to policing practice and decision-making.

Potential candidates with questions about the proposed research are invited to contact Mark and Nicky prior to application. Queries about the application process and PhD programme should be directed to the PhD programme office.

References:

- Alvarez, S., Afuah, A., & Gibson, C. 2018. Editors' comments: Should management theories take uncertainty seriously? *Academy of Management Journal*, 43(2): 169-172.
- Kay, J., & King, M. 2020. *Radical Uncertainty: Decision-Making Beyond the Numbers*: WW Norton & Company.
- Klein, G., Snowden, D., & Pin, C. L. 2011. Anticipatory thinking. In K. L. Mosier, & U. M. Fisher (Eds.), *Informed by knowledge: Expert performance in complex situations*: 235-245. New York, NY: Taylor and Francis.
- Knight, F. H. 1921. *Risk, uncertainty and profit*: New York: AM Kelley.