

Informers and new technology

Duncan Campbell previews a new book which looks at the changing ways of police information gathering

POLICE RECORDS in a typical urban area now cover one in six males in the population. Modern police technology and the increasing emphasis on 'fire-brigade' response to incidents also mean that the trend is towards a more depersonalised and insensitive kind of policing. These conclusions emerge from a new report* on 'Police powers and politics' by two law lecturers, Robert Baldwin and Richard Kinsey. For their research, they accompanied members of one of Britain's large city forces as they went about their work.

It is apparent from scattered clues in their book that the police force involved is the Lothians and Borders Police, responsible for the Edinburgh area. It uses a scheme of Area Constables whose tasks go rather wider than the sort of activities normally associated with 'community policing'. The job specification for Area Constables stresses the intelligence – and information – gathering aspects, and asks that he/she should:

Secure the services of at least one observer in every street, not a paid professional informant, but someone who knows the inhabitants and is inquisitive enough to find out what is going on and is willing to pass on such information gained.

Various sources of information can include shopkeepers or even schoolchildren who are invited to pass on information about their families; one Area Constable told the authors that:

we go down to the schools a lot. You get a hell of a lot of information from kids.

But they get wise to us about seven or eight (years old) . . .

Even so:

they still like to boast about what their big brothers or their dads have been up to . . .

The tasks involved in this variant of 'community policing', have themselves become a measure of efficiency. The job specification notes:

* *Police powers and politics* by Robert Baldwin and Richard Kinsey, to be published by Quartet Books (£9.95 hardback).

(The Constable's) effectiveness to some degree will be judged by the amount of information he/she feeds to the records of local crime intelligence.

THE RECORDS which have been set up in the Edinburgh area are already extensive. A new computer is soon to enter service. The force has a central intelligence office, each division has its own Divisional Intelligence Officer and subordinate stations feed information via full-time 'collators'. On the streets are full-time 'Crime Patrols' – plainclothes officers working primarily to gather intelligence – who 'con' or 'glean' information, while looking for criminals and their associates.

The centralised files in Edinburgh already now cover 10 per cent of the area's population. 'Well in excess of 50 per cent of these persons do not have any criminal record'. More files still are held separately by Divisional Intelligence Officers and collators. Most of the information stored, the authors report, relates to orthodox crimes, criminals – real or suspected – and their associates. 'Political' information is mainly reserved for Special Branch files.

But there were some examples of local intelligence which went beyond crime. In one station, an 'indecenties' index was kept, including the personal details of homosexuals on the grounds that they were a 'danger to themselves'. There is no outside scrutiny or serious internal review of such local databanks, drawn up by those serving as Intelligence Officers or local station 'collators'.

The authors estimated that one in six males in the area – and probably one in three of young working-class men – was 'the subject of covert criminal intelligence reports'.

This comprehensive intelligence system was not planned, but just grew over the last 20 years.

Each of the four divisions in the city has its own eight-strong Crime Patrol. The job is much sought after, as being closer to the average police officer's idea of 'real' police work than most 'uniformed' jobs. But, say Baldwin and Kinsey:

Viewed dispassionately it is sordid and invidious, calling for a talent to 'con' people, to mislead and betray confidences and generally to use and manipulate others.

On the streets, police powers to stop and search have been adapted effectively into identification checks. When dealing with unwilling informants, the authors observed police officers would often make threats they could not legally carry out, such as a night's detention in police cells.

A new computer, partly holding criminal intelligence records, began operating with the Lothian and Borders police this year. The £1.4 million installation will be the most powerful crime and information computer yet available to any local force in Britain. However, the Lothians and Borders force has promised its police committee that it will only hold intelligence files on convicted persons on the computer. On this basis only some 18,000 of the present 80,000 manual files will go onto the new

computer. But the unrestricted manual files will still remain.

The increasing emphasis on building central intelligence files fits in with new police powers, which rely more and more on detention and interrogation. Police in Scotland were given extensive new powers, such as detention, under the 1980 Scottish Criminal Justice Act. The Home Office hopes shortly to extend these powers to England and Wales.

'New technology' has also helped to produce a new pattern of 'fire brigade' policing. This is not the fault of the police, say the authors. Public images and expectations of the police have been much shaped by the regular and stylised presentation of US police tactics in numerous TV serials. As technology has become available, first in the form of radio links, and latterly as 'command and control' computers, the public have come to expect a fast police service on demand. This has encouraged heavy police emphasis on glamorous CID work and fast car patrols – and less on basic links with the community.

Ironically, the police themselves are often the first to notice the dehumanising effect. One of the senior officers interviewed by Baldwin and Kinsey said, referring specifically to the way in which a 'command and control' computer had changed his work:

In some of the smaller areas, there is some resentment in having to be controlled by big stations elsewhere controlling big areas . . . I've got to report the incident first of all to the central controller . . . who has all the command and control information . . . There's a 'big brother' type of feeling creeping into a lot of local stations . . .

One is tempted to observe: 'quite so'. □

THIS ENGLAND

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□ 'We were simply objecting to a political decision being taken for political reasons,' he said – *Wakefield Express* (R. Mitchell)

□ The first objective, non-partisan assessment of the performance and prospects of the SDP and its relationship with the Liberal Party – right up to the election of Roy Jenkins as party leader in July 1982. By the editor of the *New Statesman*. – Advert in *New Statesman* (Malcolm Norman)

□ The United Counties Bus Co at Northampton is offering cheap fares to passengers with brightly coloured hair or wearing strange clothes, under a 'daft discount' scheme to woo back lost passengers. – *Daily Telegraph* (James Scott)

□ Excessive flushing of lavatories could be one reason for a surprise water bill of £750,000 for Gwent County Council, says a report. Now the use of lavatories is to be monitored by a computer. – *Daily Telegraph* (W. Pugh)

□ Miss Eve Faulkner (Western Area Woman's Association) said that she regretted the church's role in the disarmament debate. 'One wishes the church would keep its mind on higher things,' she said. – *Guardian* (Edwin Pearce)