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LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE DECLINE IN VOLUNTEER POLICING IN MASSACHUSETTS

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1. Introduction

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has a proud tradition of volunteers in law enforcement stretching back to colonial times (Greenberg, 2015). Until very recently many police departments, large and small, had volunteer auxiliary police. Many of which had existed essentially in their current forms since the 1940s and 1950s (Spigel, 2017). This reflects the abundant picture of tens of thousands of volunteer auxiliary and reserve police in hundreds of law enforcement agencies across most states in the USA (Dobrin and Wolf, 2016).

Sadly, recent changes have seen the auxiliary model in Massachusetts almost entirely administratively swept away. What was a large, and in many ways thriving, and highly impactful, volunteer auxiliary policing model in Massachusetts, has all but gone. Changes in 'POST',The Massachusetts Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) Commission[1] certification standards at state level across Massachusetts, had the effect of wiping out all but a tiny number of auxiliary units. This rapid extinction event removed volunteer auxiliary police almost overnight from their communities across Massachusetts, communities that many of those individual auxiliaries had served in with dedication for decades. This represents the largest single volunteer police extinction event in the USA for decades.

It serves as a worrying harbinger for volunteer policing more widely, especially in other states across the USA but also worldwide. Heralding the very real and urgent strategic threat to continuity of volunteer police programmes. Something that is resonant in the UK, as we see for the twelfth successive year an annual reduction in the number of volunteer special constables.[2] Across the USA and internationally, some volunteer police models are thriving, with volunteer police impacting in a wide range of ways (Wolf and Borland Jones, 2018). Some are growing or innovating – the Netherlands, Estonia and Hungary are strong national examples, with significant scale, and interesting innovation of roles. However, many more programmes are struggling to survive (Britton, 2024).

Many volunteer police programmes around the world are struggling to maintain sustainable numbers, with the combined headwinds of generational changes in reduced patterns of voluntarism, unfavourable attitudes towards police volunteers, volunteer police models with too narrow appeal and accessibility, and increasingly hostile public perceptions of policing particularly in respect of conduct, race, and misogyny. Despite strong evidence of return on investment (Britton et al., 2023) many forces are also struggling to effectively adapt and redefine the role, capability, professional identities and operating models for the volunteer police officer in a fast-changing, and ever more complex, litigious, dangerous and contested policing environment (Britton and Callender, 2018). Retention of longer-service volunteers is proving in many contexts to be a particular challenge (Britton, 2023).

2. What has happened in Massachusetts and why?

At one level, the background of what happened to precipitate the rapid destruction of auxiliary policing in Massachusetts is a relatively straightforward one. A strong national movement for 'police reform' – driven by public and political concerns about law enforcement conduct, competence, discrimination and violence – shaped decisive action at a strategic, state-wide level (Cassino and Demir, 2024; Subramanian and Arzy, 2021). Action that was needed because law enforcement professional training, accreditation and standards across the board were in a somewhat chaotic and weak state with inconsistent (and in some cases wholly inadequate) models of professional training and accreditation. Action that saw new state legislation, creating a consistent and professionalised model. This resulted in a strengthened standards model incorporating several elements including the Municipal Police Training Committee, POST (Peace Officer Standards and Training) Commission, and a 'Bridge Academy' model to upskill and certify law enforcement officers who had not previously qualified via a full-time police academy.

The rapid dismembering of auxiliary policing that resulted from all this is a very sad story at a human level, and a narrative of real loss for law enforcement agencies, at a point of time when many can ill afford it. At a human level, for volunteers, the changes precipitated the rapid closure of almost every auxiliary unit across the state and the summary termination of many hundreds of volunteer auxiliary police careers. Dedicated volunteer officers, who in some cases had given a lifetime of service on the frontline visibly policing in their communities, were swept away- in the worst cases by email and without a word of appreciation. One

1 See https://mapostcommission.gov/

2 See https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/police-workforce-england-and-wales-31-march-2024

agency parked a truck in the police yard for equipment to be returned to.

For law enforcement agencies, many police departments found themselves overnight having to expensively cover community and charity events and seasonal patterns of demand (through paid personnel) that previously had been the preserve of the volunteer auxiliaries. They either had to pass on that expense to the community and charity organisations involved or absorb it within already stretched law enforcement budgets, experiencing the stretch of covering a wide range of policing functions through paid personnel that had for years been delivered by volunteers. This happened at a time when paid full-time law enforcement personnel are more difficult to recruit and retain than ever and with many agencies carrying challenging vacancy levels.

3. Is this the end of the road more generally for volunteer police?

The key strategic question is **'did it have to be this way?'.** Is there perhaps just a natural order of things, being borne out in Massachusetts but set to reprise in many other contexts? That 'police reform' and the strengthening of policing training, accreditation, and standards, leaves little professional safe space anymore for volunteer police? Is this the prelude of a wider extinction moment for this type of volunteer police role that is akin to a paid service law enforcement officer? Is the reality that volunteer police roles have become harder – and frankly also much more expensive – to train and equip in order to achieve a safe picture in operational competency and standards of service? Have the benefits of volunteer police always been somewhat peripheral? Even when numbers of special constables in the UK were four times greater than they are today, the frontline service hours were still in truth only ever a tiny, marginal, fraction of the overall operational delivery.

Here in the UK, I researched alongside colleagues the perspectives of senior police leaders towards volunteer special constables and some of this 'the time has passed' thinking was very evident within that study (Callender et al., 2022). There were reflections from chief constable ranked officers that we may in the UK have passed the point of 'peak Special' and that the role of police officer was simply becoming too complex, high-risk and expensive to replicate in a part-time volunteer form. Persistent tropes remained at a strategic level that volunteers couldn't be, or shouldn't be (or both), relied upon for core service delivery. Endemic problems of recruitment, retention and engagement of volunteer officers were often framed as being an unavoidable consequence of societal, economic, political, generational macro-factors beyond policing's control rather than being viewed as a consequence of failures in policing's organisational leadership, support and culture around volunteering and weaknesses in the basic design and execution of volunteer programmes.

This does seem to have been part of the thinking in Massachusetts. The design and execution (including delivery and timing) of the 'Bridge' Academies, made participation by part-time volunteers extremely difficult. Most particularly, the requirement, added retrospectively, that service hours that count towards accreditation thresholds must be paid service, left little (effectively no) route for most volunteer police to remain accredited in their volunteer police roles. For many of those who had served for years as an auxiliary, this felt far from an accidental position and instead like quite a deliberate strategy pursued by some to remove their roles. It is as if the course of further police professionalism and reform was very consciously and purposefully framed as having no place for volunteer officers – certainly not those who were armed and in uniform on the frontline. Portraying them as anachronistic, inconsistent, perhaps even dangerous, amateurs, eradicating volunteer policing roles was a necessary evil, consequential of the drive to deliver standards, consistency, and professionalisation.

While there is substance and merit in some of these views, they remain fundamentally wrong in respect of the future potential role for volunteer police. The answer is that there should be – that there needs to be – another way. Practice elsewhere already reflects that there is.

4. There are different and more positive paths to follow

California leads the way as a US state that has had a strong, cohesive focus on alignment and consistency of volunteer reserve officer training, accreditation and standards for many years. A state-wide California Reserve Peace Officers Association (CRPOA)[3] has served to help align volunteer reserves with California POST training requirements for years – with a mission of 'raising the professional, educational and employment standards of California Reserve Peace Officers'. Their annual California Reserve Peace Officers Conference is

3 See https://crpoa.org.

one of the larger law enforcement training events in the USA, drawing together substantial numbers of reserve police from agencies across the state to fulfil POST training requirements.

Many agencies elsewhere across the US also have armed volunteer police reserves without experiencing any specific issue or concern over safety, conduct and competency. The inter-operability of volunteer reserve and paid service colleagues in many agencies – Phoenix Police Department is one shining example, the Metropolitan Police in Washington DC another– is marked (Britton, 2024). Agencies such as Orange County Sheriff's Office in Florida have strong developed models of highly specialist roles within their armed reserves (Britton et al., 2019).

Where volunteer police are not armed – the New York Police Department (NYPD) Auxiliary is an example of the largest single agency (Albrecht, 2017), but auxiliary models across Canada (O'Connor et al., 2021) provide many more examples, and of course the volunteer special constabularies across the UK provide considerable evidence that here too, with well-designed and managed programmes, volunteer police can serve safely, effectively, and professionally. In Hungary, tens of thousands of auxiliary police serve unarmed. In New York City, NYPD auxiliary officers are highly visible, in large numbers, policing some hugely challenging precincts across the city. Their model has responded and adapted to some existential challenges over its long and proud history, including the death in service of unarmed auxiliaries. The subsequent adaptation and focus on safety and professionalisation have taken it to a place where there are several thousand citizens volunteering in uniform, making a huge, visible difference on the streets of New York.

There is also recognition that far from being particularly unsafe, or amateurish, or exhibiting lower standards of discipline or poorer behaviours, volunteer police are typically experienced as the precise opposite. This is not a new observation. Writing about the special constabulary in London in the UK during the early 20th century, the historian Ronald Seth (Seth, 1961) reflects that the near absence over several years of complaints and misconduct across a body of tens of thousands was *"a fine reflection on the care with which the Specials were selected and on the discipline of the men and their magnificent spirit"*. Fast-forward a century and much of the same sentiment can still apply in the UK. Recent national benchmarking work across England and Wales of special constabularies has shown low – and lower than expected (comparatively alongside 'regular' paid police officers) – levels of investigation of misconduct. In the USA, despite in recent years the levels of concern and scale of media focus on police conduct, and police involved violence, a vanishingly small proportion of that coverage appears to relate specifically to volunteer officers. In contrast to the lack of evidence of volunteer officer's problematic misconduct or practice incompetency patterns, specifically in Massachusetts, recent media reports on the police academy programmes – those very same programmes that volunteer police have effectively been removed from having access to – reflect that numerous paid officer instructors delivering those programmes have been subject to serious investigation[4] -

The argument that the era of the part-time, (considered amateur), volunteer has passed, swept away by considerations of professionalisation and reform, does not fit the evidence.

5. The strategic case is strongly for more, not less, volunteer police

The case for finding a strategic path for the continuation of volunteer policing remains very strong. Probably stronger than ever, given the challenges that policing faces (Britton and Knight, 2021).

Perhaps ironically, given the experience in Massachusetts much of the essence of 'police reform' is utterly embodied, indeed brought to life, through the concept of volunteer police; individuals drawn from their local community. This manifestation of the foundational Peelian principle of the citizenry in uniform, that the police are the public and that the public are the police, is surely exactly the sort of thing that is especially needed at this challenging time. It is needed to bridge law enforcement agencies and their (sometimes estranged) communities; to help re-set, re-focus, and re-position law enforcement in an era pivoting to community engagement, trust and confidence; to focus on crime prevention and pro-active neighbourhood co-production of public safety and away from more response-based, or remote, or militaristic forms of policing.

Auxiliary and reserve policing help bridge the divide, creating ambassadors for law enforcement in communities, opening up policing to the public.

4 See https://www.cbsnews.com/boston/news/instructors-massachusetts-police-academies-complaints-criminal-behavior-investigation/

Volunteer officers bring in different perspectives and cultures that can challenge elements of groupthink or problematic culture within paid service law enforcement. Volunteer police are often more diverse, in terms of race, background, and gender. Often, they live and work in the communities they police, bringing a different level of insight on, and lived experience of, those communities. The sorts of roles volunteer police often play – that many auxiliaries in Massachusetts used to perform – often bring them close up, interactive and hands-on in communities, commonly more so than many of their paid service colleagues.

Law enforcement also has a chronic – and building – paid service recruitment and retention crisis, particularly in the US (Skaggs et al., 2022). The brutal reality is that, for a host of reasons, the age-old traditional model of recruiting through full-time, militaristic-style, 'stress' academies, young officers who will then serve in law enforcement for long, perhaps life-long, careers is slowly dying, with lower recruit flows and spaces on academies and a lower proportion serving beyond a few years. Similar trends are beginning to be seen in the UK as well, with reductions in applications and with many more paid service officers than was ever the case leaving very early in their careers (Wilson et al., 2023). This is fast becoming a police staffing crisis of wartime proportions. At times of staffing crises, at times of war, volunteer policing has in many different contexts and countries stepped up to play a much greater part. This feels like a similar strategic moment, when volunteer police could come into their own as a key part of the new solutions for sustainable, effective, affordable law enforcement.

6. What are the specific lessons from Massachusetts for the survival of volunteer police elsewhere?

What might those who lead and champion volunteer police elsewhere beyond Massachusetts seek to do, to help defend and maintain their own volunteer police programmes? What are the protective factors, strategically, for volunteer policing?

Massachusetts had some great auxiliary programmes, and some extraordinary people volunteering as auxiliary officers. I have met and spoken with many of them, all amazing people. As is so very often the case with those who volunteer in policing roles, it is impossible not to be impressed with the character of those involved, their skill sets and the professional and personal experience that they bring in abundance to their roles.

This in itself was not enough.

What the case of Massachusetts reflects is that if volunteer policing is not organised, does not have a single voice, does not have a coherence, it struggles to have influence – at a strategic leadership level in policing, and particularly politically.

A key lesson from Massachusetts is that it can be hard to promote and project the positive story of volunteer policing, but it is essential to do so. There can be limited public knowledge and interest; police leaders are often simply too busy doing other things and volunteer policing is often a little known or appreciated agenda for politicians and other key stakeholders and decision makers. The extinction of volunteer police in Massachusetts exposed the risks of not having a sufficient profile and influence in these ways, with the right people, meaning that when key decisions were being taken, there was seemingly often nobody at the top table who 'got' the value, and 'had the back', of auxiliaries.

7. Conclusions

An extinction event for volunteer police in Massachusetts may feel a very distant, far-off thing, for many of those responsible for leading and shaping volunteer police programmes in their own states and countries around the world. It may indeed be distant geographically for some, it may represent a very different political context for others, but Massachusetts shares a commonality of factors with other policing contexts and the death of the Massachusetts auxiliary model should be a wake-up call more broadly across USA policing, and internationally.

Volunteer police programmes need to adapt to a new, post- 'police reform', policing landscape. They need to learn how to broaden appeal, improve access, and grow and flourish despite the strategic headwinds. Also, importantly, they need to better project and position the value – and values – embodied in volunteer police with police senior leaders, with politicians, and with the public.

The irony is that there has never been a point in time when fostering and growing volunteer police models has been more relevant, and yet there has also never been a time when so many volunteer programmes are facing existential threats to their sustainability and continuity.

There is a huge moment of opportunity. This can be framed in the context of 'police reform', situated in the context of the police legitimacy crisis and in the police recruitment and retention crisis, recognising the unique strategic challenges of new crime and security challenges and technology and societal change. This is a moment of opportunity to bring volunteer police out of the strategic shadows, stop volunteering being a peripheral and a somewhat neglected thing and to instead set a real ambition for the big part it can play in the future.

We should all take a moment to mourn what has happened in Massachusetts. To recognise the human stories that accompany it. To recognise what has been lost to policing. To promise ourselves this will not become a trend worldwide. That instead we can confidently and safely grow new forms of policing delivery, and if we dare, realise new visions for volunteer police, across the service to be bold and to think differently.

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