

Watchdog says police cuts have left forces in 'perilous state'

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Jamie Grierson

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Policing in England and Wales is in a “potentially perilous state” as government cuts lead to investigations being shelved, vulnerable victims being let down and tens of thousands of dangerous suspects remaining at large, a watchdog has warned.

In a report on effectiveness in policing, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) uncovered a range of “dangerous” and “disturbing” practices that have arisen out of police forces’ approach to dealing with [budget cuts in excess of 20%](#).

Some police staff are deliberately downgrading emergency calls in order to justify a slower response when there is a shortage of officers, HMIC said, while others are reclassifying high-risk domestic abuse victims to a lower level of concern.

[Police](#) officers are being assigned to investigations that they are not qualified to conduct, the watchdog found, while forces are struggling to get to grips with the volume of wanted suspects – including murderers, rapists and violent offenders.

Around a third of domestic abuse cases across England and Wales are being shelved because the victim does not support police action – this rises to 50% in five of the 43 forces, which has led to concern at HMIC that officers are not properly discharging their responsibilities in a bid to slash their workload.

HMIC also issued a warning that a shortage of detectives and investigators amounts to a “national crisis”.

In a stark message about the current state of policing, Zoë Billingham, Her Majesty’s Inspector of Constabulary, said the “disturbing” practices did not apply to the majority of forces but the watchdog could see the problems spreading if action was not taken.

“We’re leading to a very serious conclusion regarding the potentially perilous state of policing,” she said. “It’s a red flag that we’re raising at this stage. A large red flag.”

Billingham said “ad hoc rationing” of services was due to “stretch in the system” and was the “unintended consequence of the way in which some forces have adapted to austerity”.

“This suppression of demand, this ad hoc rationing that’s happening at different pinch points, isn’t part of a deliberate plan, it’s not part of a rational evidence-based plan decision model,” she said. “It’s happening under the radar, it’s often happening by stealth and it’s often an unintended consequence of the way in which some forces have adapted to austerity.”

Despite the inspector’s criticism of the policing landscape, the majority of police forces were graded as “good” or “outstanding” for effectiveness. One force – Bedfordshire police – was rated inadequate.

But the inspectorate said it had discovered some forces using “inappropriate” methods to deal with increasing levels of demand with fewer resources.

In some cases, this has led to failings in dealing with the most vulnerable victims, HMIC said, in particular to victims of domestic abuse. In two forces, for example, domestic abuse risk assessments were, in too many cases, conducted over the telephone when the call taker judged that there was not an immediate risk to the victim. HMIC said this was in part due to the increase in demand on the service: between August 2013 and June 2016 police recorded a 61% increase in domestic abuse crimes. As a way of dealing with this demand, some

forces are not sending officers to domestic abuse incidents.

Similarly, forces are struggling to cope with the number of wanted suspects. HMIC found that 67,000 wanted suspects had not been placed on the police national computer (PNC). In addition, as of August, there were 45,960 wanted suspects on the PNC, including those being sought for offences including terrorism, murder and rape.

“In too many forces, there is a lack of grip, supervision, active management, pursuit and tracking down of wanted suspects,” the report said.

HMIC said it was concerned about the workloads of the teams supervising registered sex offenders. It found that throughout England and Wales, the risk represented by some 2,700 registered sex offenders had yet to be assessed by police officers responsible for their supervision in order to keep communities safe. In six forces, more than 10% of registered sex offenders had yet to be assessed at the time of the inspection. In one force, that figure was 30%.

The watchdog found that organised crime groups were not being assessed properly by some forces, including the Metropolitan police. Assessing organised crime gangs, once they have been identified, allows forces to understand the threat posed and to decide which groups to tackle first.

“It is unacceptable that some large urban forces with a high threat from serious and organised crime have relatively fewer mapped criminal groups than small rural forces,” the report said.

The difficulties are being compounded by what HMIC called the “national crisis” of the severe shortage of investigators, such as detectives. The lack of investigators is leading to “excessive workloads and stress” among police officers and staff, the watchdog said. The inspectorate added the shortage meant some investigations were being led by those who lacked the appropriate skills and experience.

Ch Supt Gavin Thomas, the president of the Police Superintendents’ Association of England and Wales, said: “The public will be worried by this report and I share their concerns. There are now 34,000 fewer staff working in policing than there were in 2010, including 19,000 fewer police officers. The amount of money available for policing has also reduced over time.

“At the same time, a great deal of police time and resources are now spent meeting the demands of complex welfare and vulnerability issues in society. As a minimum these should be addressed in partnership with other public services. But as a 24/7 service, policing continues to pick up demand that is not being met by other services.”

Steve White, chair of the Police Federation of England and Wales, which represents tens of thousands of rank-and-file officers, said: “The federation has been pointing out the pitfalls of continually taking the axe to police budgets over successive years and warning that it will actually hurt the very people we have pledged to protect – members of the public.

“Some forces are clearly coping better than others, but you can’t compare 43 forces to one another – it’s like comparing apples with pears. What we are seeing is a service that is only being driven by cost constraints and some areas of policing are on the critical list and heading towards intensive care.”

Brandon Lewis, minister for policing and the fire service, said: “I am pleased that two-thirds of forces are rated in [the] report as either good or outstanding, and that there have been real improvements, in particular, in the overall police response to vulnerable people.

“But a number of forces clearly still have more work to do to ensure they are providing the level of service which communities expect and deserve.

“This government has protected police funding, through the 2015 spending review. There can be no excuse for any force that fails to deliver on its obligations – those identified as inadequate or requiring improvement must

take HMIC's findings very seriously."

Diane Abbott, the shadow home secretary, said: "The report shows that the police are doing their best despite this Tory government's actions. Her Majesty's inspectorate says that some forces are struggling to respond to shrinking resources. Some are artificially downgrading the severity of calls, others are not able to properly carry out their core functions of crime prevention, public security and apprehending criminals. Some are setting quotas for specialist police or failing to register organised gangs in their area, because that would require further action.

"We should be clear, the primary responsibility for this is not individual forces or officers. The fault lies with the Tory government, who have cut 20,000 police officers and who are now cutting police budgets across the country."

Brian Paddick, Liberal Democrat shadow home secretary and former deputy assistant commissioner in the Metropolitan police, said: "Police officers have a 'can-do' mentality. But the thin blue line is getting stretched to breaking point and vulnerable people are being placed at risk as a result.

"It is totally unacceptable that police officers, who are doing more than anyone can reasonably expect of them, are being forced to downgrade 'life at risk' calls. How long will it be before someone dies because there is no police officer to respond?"