Introducing Restorative Justice To The Police Complaints System: Close Encounters Of The Rare Kind

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The creation of an Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) which begins operation in 2004, will introduce a greater degree of independent investigation and oversight into the Police Complaints system in England and Wales. These changes envisage an expanded role for local (informal) resolution, with a new range of options including restorative justice conferences. With funding from the Nuffield Foundation, this paper presents the findings of a study contrasting informal resolution in a police force operating the existing statutory system in a traditional way, with a force piloting the use of restorative justice conferences (characterised by meetings between complainants and officers complained about). The research sought to examine how complainants saw the informal resolution process and to ascertain their level of interest in these restorative conferences.

In total, a sample of 54 respondents was achieved, making this the largest study of informally resolved complaints conducted to date in the United Kingdom. Data is presented on the characteristics of the incidents which generated complaints and the initial aims and expectations of those involved. The research also examines complainant experiences of the process, focusing on the lodging of the complaint, the methods by which the matter was handled and the apparent outcome achieved. In addition, the longer-term implications of the complaints process are addressed, exploring complainant ideas about the scope for reforming the system and the potential for restorative justice to meet more fully complainant needs. As with other research on the police complaints system, the findings indicate a worrying degree of cynicism and lack of confidence in the existing system of informal resolution. Where this study has gone further is in revealing a substantial degree of interest amongst complainants in the idea of a restorative justice-style meeting with the officers complained against.

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