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Debate Article

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Ten reasons why it is difficult to outsource police functions to the private sector (and one reason why it should not be done)

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The last 15 years have witnessed the rise and fall of police outsourcing in the UK. In response to unprecedented post-2008 financial crisis budget cuts, police forces began to explore the idea of contracting out an array of public-facing functions (including patrol, investigation, emergency and non-emergency call handling and running police station front-counters) to the private sector as a way of realizing fast-acting cost reductions (Rogers and Gravelle, 2012). In the event, however, very few contracts were signed and most of those which came into effect have since been terminated, leaving only a scattering of small-scale outsourcing arrangements across the national policing landscape (mostly in custody suites). Drawing upon a decade of research on the politics of police outsourcing and a deep-dive study into the largest outsourcing project to reach fruition—the £229 million Lincolnshire Police-G4S Strategic Partnership which ran from April 2012 to March 2022 and covered 18 service areas—this article offers 10 reasons why it is difficult to outsource frontline police functions to the private sector, before advancing one overriding reason why it should not be done (White, 2014; 2015; 2025; 2026). While these observations are rooted in the UK case, they also hold relevance for countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA, where (in principle at least) democratically-mandated police forces take the lead in maintaining domestic law and order against the backdrop of a neoliberal policy landscape (for more examples of police outsourcing in these countries see Ayling et al., 2009).

Start-up hurdles

One bundle of reasons concerns start-up hurdles. (1) Given the deep cultural imprint of the police as the symbolic embodiment (if not always reality) of public protection—what Reiner (2010, p. 3) calls ‘police fetishism’ and Loader et al. (2014, p. 485) the ‘democratic promise of security’—the public are often instinctively resistant to the notion of allowing the market into this supposedly sovereign domain. (2) Because fear sells, the media are quick to escalate the stakes of this potentially heated debate, inviting a willing cadre of politicians and commentators to weigh in on the dangers of ‘privatization’—a more provocative term than outsourcing due to its association with deep market penetration into the public sphere through the sale of state assets to commercial enterprises. (3) All of this breeds scepticism towards police outsourcing among contract-holders-in-the-making, such as police and crime commissioners and chief constables, who do not want to upset their constituents. (4) Nor for that matter do these key decision-makers want to cause stress among their employees who might understandably be anxious about their future job prospects under outsourcing arrangements and duly voice their apprehensions through the unions. (5) Politics aside, the technocratic process of putting together a large-scale outsourcing project also requires a huge amount of time (negotiations with prospective companies can easily run over a year) and expertise in contract design (breaking down each complex police function into unit costs), neither of which the police have in abundance. As such, simply setting in motion the wheels of a police outsourcing project can resemble an uphill struggle—something which Surrey Police and West Midlands Police, two of the other forces initially on a similar trajectory to Lincolnshire Police, found out the hard way when their ambitious £1.5 billion outsourcing deal failed to see daylight after years of effort.

Service delivery issues

Another bundle of reasons relates to service delivery issues once the contract is up and running. (6) When a private sector company takes over a service area it does not parachute in an entirely new team of frontline workers, rather it inherits those employees already in place through statutory employment regulations, many of whom are not happy about losing their status as police workers and depart or protest in response. (7) Those who do stay continue to perform their daily tasks but with subtle changes, including a new uniform adorned with the logo of their new employer—something which members of the public, now confronted with the reality of a private sector company delivering what they regard as an intrinsic public function, may take umbrage with, complaining to the worker standing in front of them and in wider circuits of communication. (8) Such

negative connotations gain traction in policing circles, with colleagues in forces which have not embarked on this direction of travel (which is most of the police workforce in the UK) often displaying wariness towards such experimentation with the market. (9) And this wariness is not without foundation, for there is a genuine tension between the need to reconcile contractually agreed unit costs for delivering a service with the inherent complexity and unpredictability of public need, creating daily headaches for police managers. (10) So, too, is there risk in signing up to a long-term contractually-bound operating model in a fast-changing social and technological landscape which may require the police to make adaptations beyond the scope and permissions of the contract—indeed, such contractually-determined inflexibility was the official reason given by Lincolnshire Police for terminating its contract with G4S at the earliest opportunity, though the other reasons certainly factored in.

Against outsourcing

These 10 reasons why it is difficult to outsource police functions to the private sector point to one broad reason why it should not be done: materially and symbolically it makes sense for core police functions to be delivered through the public sector. There is a lot to unpack in this statement—far too much for the confines of this short article—but some of the key propositions can be briefly stated. If the essence of police work is, as Bittner (2005 [1974], p. 161) famously put it, dealing with open-ended and ill-defined situations where ‘something-ought-not-to-be-happening-and-about-which-someone-had-better-do-something-now!’, the police response needs to be one of ‘doing whatever it takes’ while recognizing that ‘all citizens matter equally’, not ‘let us consult the contract’. To be fair, in the Lincolnshire Police-G4S Strategic Partnership common sense usually prevailed, with elements of the contract being switched off during the Covid 19 pandemic for instance. But the wider point stands. Contracts get in the way of public exigencies. Furthermore, even if the police cannot (or choose not to) get the job done, the underlying fact that the institution exists in the public sphere is important because it provides reassurance to the public that there is a democratic order in which security is viewed as a shared puzzle. In this way, as Loader and Walker (2007) observe, the police institution performs a ‘constitutive’ role in the formation of society. Of course, these propositions are aspirational and there are many reasons to remain sceptical about state-delivered policing—a glance at the headlines on any given day is often a stark reminder of this (Feilzer and Loftus, 2024). But it is crucial not to lose sight of the theory and practice of public policing undistorted by the effects of profit maximization. For this overriding reason, frontline police functions should not be contracted out to the private sector.

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