# Police Patrol observations

**Information for users of data from a programme of systematic social observation submitted to the UKDS**

**Background**

This data was produced as part of a larger, ESRC ‘knowledge exchange’ funded project investigating the use of mounted police in the United Kingdom – see here for details: <http://www.rand.org/randeurope/research/projects/mounted-police-uk.html> (a copy of the project report is also included in this data package). As part of this project the research team engaged in systematic observations of mounted police officers and neighbourhood (foot patrol) officers in three police force areas in late the spring of 2014. The intention was to develop (a) a statistical account of the volume, kinds, and quality of experiences between mounted police and citizens during routine patrol activities, and (b) a comparative account of the differences in volume, kinds and quality of experiences between mounted police and citizens as compared to those between neighbourhood police and citizens. A qualitative/descriptive picture of normal mounted police activities and routines was developed alongside the systematic observations, although only the latter are included in the dataset described here.

**Data collection**

All data were collected via a mobile phone app. Researchers followed police community patrols – mounted and foot – over the course of a shift. Followed in a literal sense, in the observer would tail the officers as they went about their business, within ear shot but far enough away that passersby would not automatically assume they were with the police. While some observer effect was inevitable it is hoped this approach minimised the influence of the researcher on the encounters that occurred.

As or immediately after encounters between police and members of the public took place, the researcher would open a new form on the app, complete relevant sections, and then, once the form was complete, upload it to a cloud-based server. This methodology ensured that no data entry other than the initial completion of the form was required, as the software automatically populated a database with entries as they came in. The database could then be downloaded for analysis. See the project report for more details on the method involved.

A number of researchers were involved in collecting the data (11 in total); the guidance given to the researchers on how to conduct the observations is reproduced at the end of this note. Researchers are indicated by a unique identifier in the dataset. Trial observations were carried out before the data collection period to ensure that the mobile phone app worked and to train the researchers involved.

*Conduct of the observations*

In total 28 shifts were observed in the Spring of 2014, 15 mounted and 13 foot. Foot patrol shifts were selected to match similar mounted patrol shifts; for example, as mounted patrols were all mid-day during this period (beginning between 10:00-11:00 and ending between 13:00 and 15:00) the researchers only undertook observations with daytime foot patrols. Additionally, efforts were made to balance the amount of time spent with each during days which were assumed to be less-busy in terms of foot traffic on streets (i.e. Monday-Thursday) and busier days (i.e. Friday-Saturday), so that a preponderance of busier days with either mounted or foot patrols did not skew the data.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Variables**

Variables pertaining to the observations were recorded under one of four categories of engagements between police and public:

1. **Interactions**: One coding sheet was completed for any instance where one or more police officers, while being observed, directly engage in a substantial or prolonged discussion or intervention with one or more citizens.
2. **Encounters**: A separate coding sheet was completed for any instance where one or more citizens actively notices or responds to a police officer while the officer is being observed, where this does not result in a substantial interaction.
3. **Multiple Encounters**: A separate coding sheet was also completed for encounters where large groups gather for casual/friendly interactions around officers (e.g. to say hello, pet the horse, etc.).
4. **Acknowledgements:** Finally, where citizens actively recognised the presence of officers (e.g. stop-and-point, waves and other gestures towards officers) but where no more significant interaction or encounter took place, we recorded a simple count using a hand tally machine**.**

Acknowledgements were therefore simply counted. The number of encounters, multiple encounters and interactions were recorded via the mobile app, alongside a number of details regarding the engagement – the number of people involved, length, tone, level of conflict, outcome, reason for the engagement (i.e. relating to crime, or not), and so on. A key aim here was to see if mounted police patrols were different from foot patrols in any of these qualitative or categorical measures. The full codebook and variables recorded can be found in the data dictionary.

Observers recorded all interactions and encounters that were visible to them during a shift. It was left to the individual researcher to determine whether an instance of citizen/police interface was an interaction, an encounter or an acknowledgement – to ensure consistency this decision-making process was iteratively discussed within the research team during piloting of the method.

If a situation involved both an interaction (e.g., with a victim, witness, complainant, or offender) and an encounter (e.g. where a crowd of onlookers are also present), the observer would endeavour to record a coding sheet for both an interaction and an encounter. If it is not possible to capture both effectively, the observer would capture the details of the interaction first, and then attempt to capture details about the encounter once there was more time; interactions were rarer than encounters and so were a higher priority for data collection.

**Structure of the dataset**

The dataset provided to the UKDS is, effectively, multi-level: observations of interactions, encounters and multiple encounters are clustered within shifts. Individual entries (cases) refer to specific observations. Some variables relate to the shift – such as public facing time and number of acknowledgements – and are thus constant across all the observations that occurred on that shift, while others relate to individual observations, such as number of citizens present. Note, finally, that some variables that could in theory vary within a shift – such as the number of mounted police present – in practice did not.

**Guidance to researchers**

Replicated below is the field guidance provided to the researchers involved in the project. It contained information on how to conduct the observations, how to deal with questions from police and members of the public, and so on.

# **Guidebook:** Field guidance for SSO

This guidebook contains basic advice for conducting objective and ethical research using our specified methods. However, at all times how you respond to questions, queries or situations will be down to your judgement. If an unexpected situation arises in the field, please make a note of it and how you handled it in your written account of the day’s activities.

## Responding to questions and queries

It will be important to avoid extended discussions while in the field, primarily to avoid introducing bias to the officer(s) being studied. Discussions with the officers being observed, as well as with members of the public and other police personnel, may have the effect of changing the ways in which officers ultimately handle interactions or conduct themselves in the field. As such, in all cases try to keep your answers honest but succinct.

### Responding to questions from police

The officers will have been briefed about the study, and most mounted officers will be aware of it by the time observations begin. As such, do not try to mislead the officers regarding the purpose of the study. If asked for your opinion on any matter (mounted policing or otherwise), be honest, as this will be important to maintain trust throughout the observations. If asked about the study, emphasize that the research is looking at mounted policing relative to many things police do, and that these observations are only a part of a much larger study. Try to avoid specifics about the things we are measuring in the SSO exercise, as knowledge of these may influence officers’ behaviours.

### Responding to questions from members of the public

While on observations, if a member of the public asks what you’re doing, please respond that you are part of a project studying various aspects of policing in the UK, and that at present you are recording your observations on a mobile app. If asked for further details, feel free to elaborate that you are specifically looking at mounted police work and that the final report will be available on the Oxford Criminology website later in 2014 if they are interested.

### Responding to questions from people involved in an incident

In most cases, it is likely that the police officer will explain your presence to any person(s) involved in an incident. If you are addressed directly, follow the guidance on responding to members of the public. If your presence or activity appears to be aggravating a situation or interfering with the ability of the officer(s) to do their job, withdraw from the situation and complete your data input at a better time.

## General ethics statement

In all instances, if asked about ethics, privacy, or confidentiality issues, respond that all data is being recorded anonymously and will only be available to members of the project team. Pictures will only be taken in public spaces, and any future reproduction will blur facial features. You may also respond that all research is being done in accordance with Oxford’s research ethics policies. Queries or complaints about our research should first go through Chris at the [mountedpolice@crim.ox.ac.uk](mailto:mountedpolice@crim.ox.ac.uk) address, after which any unresolved issues regarding the research may be sent to [ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk). Finally, remember that these observations are taking place in a criminal justice setting, and any recorded materials relating to an officer’s shift could conceivably be requested in relation to a court proceeding. If such a request were made, we would comply with it.

## Interpreting Forms app categories

Most of the categories in the app should be easy to interpret. Some may require explanation, and so guidance is below. In many cases the decision will still be to the observer’s judgement, so always feel free to discuss your choices with other observers to ensure consistency. As well, if you encounter any issues of interpretation that you feel should be included here, please let Chris know.

### General rule for recording categorical data

For all categorical variables, only record a category if you are confident that it is accurate. If you can’t be confident (e.g. if you are at too great a distance to see or hear), confirm with the officer after the incident has completed as they may be able to provide the required information. If you are still uncertain, record ‘unknown’. If the observed information does not match a category, enter a new category in the appropriate ‘other’ text box.

### Determining ‘tone’ of an interaction or encounter

The categories in this response are on a scale from Very Positive to Very Negative, where Positive and Negative refer to your impression of how the interaction reflects the citizen(s)’ perceptions of the experience. ‘Very positive’ should be only those interactions where no negative aspects of the interaction could be assumed, and where an explicitly positive exchange occurred. ‘Quite positive’ should be those interactions or encounters that were predominantly positive, with some negative aspects. ‘Neutral’ refers to interactions or encounters that were neither positive nor negative, while ‘Ambiguous’ refers to those that had equal parts positive and negative aspects. ‘Quite negative’ is a predominantly negative interaction or encounter with some positive aspects, and ‘Very negative’ is an interaction or encounter with no discernible positive quality from a citizen perspective.

### Recording numbers of officers and citizens in patrol observations

This will always be your best estimate of **number of officers visible** and **number of citizens involved** during an incident or encounter. As numbers of officers and citizens may change throughout the run of an incident or observation, use the *total* number involved from start to finish (e.g., if three citizens are involved at the beginning, and then one leaves and two more join, you should record five citizens involved). If the number of officers or citizens changes during an incident, make a note of this in the ‘other comments’ section.

The following resource provides some guidelines on crowd size estimates: <http://howto.wired.com/wiki/Estimate_the_Size_of_a_Crowd>.  It says:

* In a loose crowd, where people are at an arm’s length of each other, figure about 10 square feet of space per person.
* In a tighter crowd, it's about half that, or 5 square feet.
* In a packed crowd, it's more like 2.5 square feet.

It also says estimating crowd size is very complicated, and even sophisticated techniques result in wildly different estimations, so your best effort is all we can ask.

1. In total, observers spent four shifts each with foot and mounted during Friday or Saturday shifts, with all remaining shifts of weekdays. Three of the shifts with mounted officers were recorded as wet or rainy, while one foot shift faced inclement weather. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)