



# Are Changes within Public Order Strategy in British Policing Explained by Social Class?

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## Objective

This project sought to gain a deeper understanding on the link between policing and the politics behind public assembly.

It set out to study whether changes in British public order strategy are connected to the group-level characteristics of protestors, focusing on the potential implicit bias in the decision-making process amongst public order commanders.

The research centres around the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) in London which is the largest police force in the UK. London holds substantial political and economic significance, attracting a wide range of protest groups and therefore making it a useful case to study.

## Significance

The study of public assembly is especially salient, with a Western 'protest boom' in the past decade. Social class is also a relevant point of discussion, with the government's Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (CREd) 2021 referencing class in terms of life outcomes compared to other binary factors such as race.

Protest policing more generally has been under the spotlight also, with the MPS responding to several high-profile demonstrations such as Black Lives Matter and Extinction Rebellion in recent years.

## Methodology

- Discourse Analysis – focussing on the ideological origins of policing to frames the institution before considering potential bias.
- Process Tracing – considering the emergence of neoliberal ideas in the past four decades, using this to explain certain case studies.

Primary sources such as police reports from the MPS alongside statistics from the ONS and Mayor of London's Office were interspersed with secondary sources and existing literature from other scholars, to encompass the viewpoint of both the police and the protestors.

## Findings

The research begun by exploring Marxist and postcolonial conceptions of policing, with both perceiving the police as a forceful, repressive institution targeting the working classes and ethnic minorities. It combined this with the historical nature of public order policing, from the militaristic style during the nineteenth and early twentieth century to the more accommodating style since the 1970s. The project then analysed the influence of social class on protest policing, before moving on to analyse other identifying characteristics such as race.

Yet the results showed that historic conceptions of the police do not materialise and irrespective of the class or racial identification of the protest group, the police responded no differently. Indeed the MPS were consistently restrained in their approach, leading the thesis to consider broader changes of power and intervention in the British state, which offer a more convincing explanation of the changes in strategy..

### *The Role of Social Class...*

While criminality is often associated with lower-class people and communities, there is little evidence that the class of protestors plays a role in public order policing. Predominately working class demonstrations such as the Anti-Austerity movement (post-2010) and Student Fees protestors (2010 & 2015) has seen an incredibly restrained police response.

### *The Role of Race...*

Race offers a more specific identifying characteristic, with the CREd 2021 noting that race is a valid component of social class. Reports such as the Macpherson Inquiry 1999 show that racism is evident in the police and the under-representation of BAME officers shows advancement is slow. However, predominantly black activism such as the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 and even the London Riots in 2011 saw an incredibly restrained police response also.

### *The Role of Neoliberalism*

Neoliberal values stemming from the 1980s to present day offers a convincing explanation for the police strategy of restraint:

- **Police Resources** – financial strain on police forces as a result of budget cuts, following the push towards New Public Management, has seen the MPS lose over 30,000 officers and staff in just five years. With significantly fewer resources the police's capabilities to respond to protest are greatly restricted.
- **Police Autonomy** – the introduction of elected Police and Crime Commissioners alongside growing demand from both the government and protestors to focus on the human rights of activists has seen the police's freedom constrained. The police are now far more accountable, with Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) and the Joint Committee on Human Rights (JCHR) setting precedents around protest policing. This follows the policy of 'rolling back the state' under neoliberalism.

Using David Harvey's (2007) work, this project concludes that neoliberalism is a covert class-based process. Indeed neoliberal values have had a remarkable impact upon the police and go a considerable way in explaining these changes. Therefore, social class does explain changes in public order policing but in a way which one may not initially perceive.



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